

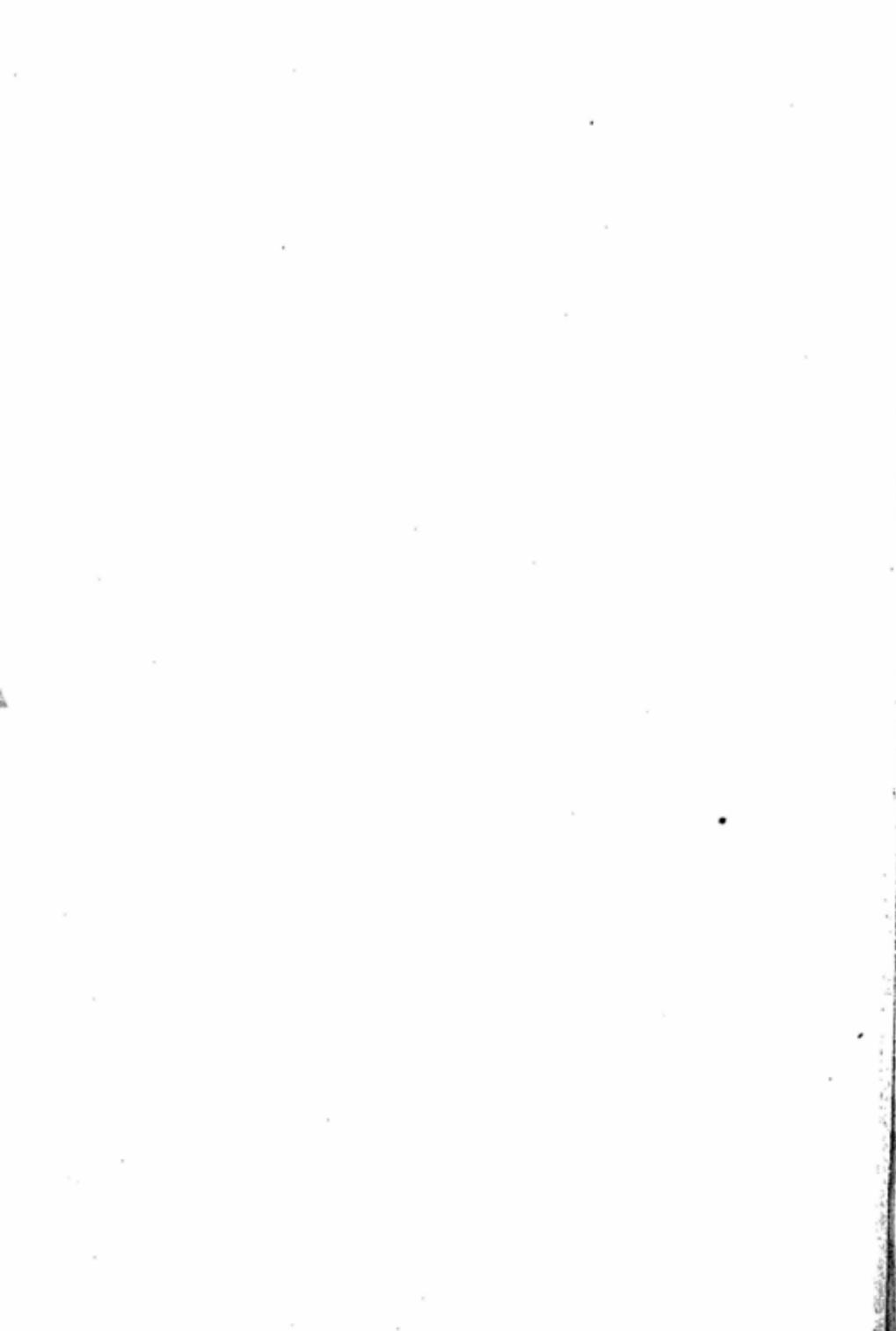
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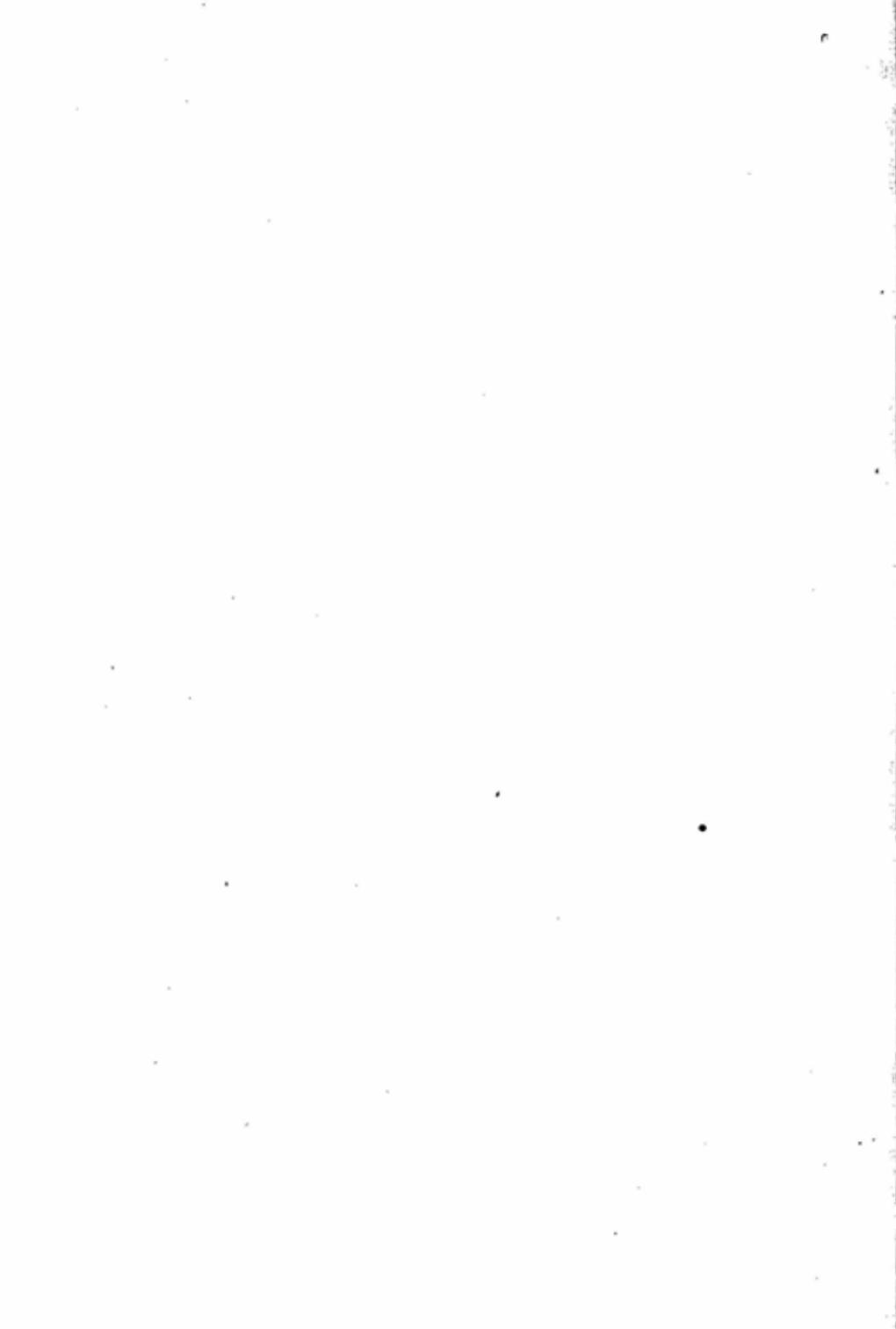
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CHAPTER I

THE TEMPEST

NICKY clung to the rail, his knuckles white, his thin face flushed with excitement.

The thunder rattled and rumbled, the boatswain's pipe shrilled, the staggering seamen bawled to one another through the din. The words came to him confusedly. "Take in the topsail!" And the bo'sun's angry bellow: "Tend to the master's whistle!"

He knew the situation was critical. The coast, unknown and invisible, was all too near. It was touch and go. In another minute the ship might be aground, with the cruel breakers pounding her to pieces. He wanted to rush down and help. . . .

No, that wouldn't be any good. He'd only be a nuisance. Some of the passengers had come out of their cabins, and the bo'sun was cursing them for getting in the way. The fools! Slithering about there, all cloaks and draggled plumes and long swords, tripping up themselves and everybody else! Why couldn't they stay below?

The bo'sun was doing his best. His keen eyes roved the shrouds, and every moment or two he yelled some further instruction to the unseen men in the rigging. "Down with the topmast! Bring her to try with main-course!" It was double-Dutch to Nicky, but he felt sure that if any one could save the ship, the bo'sun was the man to do it. His own heart was pounding with excitement.

But it was all in vain. There was a sudden crash, a rush

of stumbling, dripping sailors across his line of vision, and then the horrible sound of grinding, splintering timbers. It was all up now. They were aground. . . .

"They'd look well in a real storm—standing about and speechifying like that," said the man on his right with a deep chuckle.

Nicky slipped back into his seat with a sigh. He was angry with the man for shattering the illusion—for reminding him that they weren't really tossing in a Mediterranean storm, with a rocky desert island to leeward, but sitting quite safely in the upper gallery of the Globe Theatre, watching Will Shakespeare's new play. It had all seemed so real a moment ago. The level stage had been a deck—you could have sworn that it shifted and tilted as the actors reeled across it. The pale spring sunshine and the circle of blue, satin-like sky had been forgotten. The author's words—and the efforts of the men behind the scenes—had conjured up darkness, thunder, lightning, the beat of surf, and the hiss of rain.

And now he remembered it was only a play. The ship and its company had gone, their fate uncertain. A magician was making long speeches to his daughter in their cave. The audience coughed and fidgeted. The privileged few who had taken seats on the platform itself were filling long pipes with the new stinking weed, tobacco. The actor playing Prospero looked daggers at them—the smoke had drifted across and set him coughing in the middle of his finest speech—but he dared not complain. You had to keep in with these fashionable young men from Court, if you wanted your play to be a success.

Nicky stole a glance at the man whose chuckling comment had brought him so sharply back to earth.

He certainly looked as though he had travelled, so no

doubt he had a right to criticize the way the stage-seamen played their parts. His skin was bronze-red, corrugated by the weather, and there were deeply cut crow's feet round his blue eyes, where he had screwed them up against the glare of the tropical sun. Nicky's eyes fell to the big, useful hands, resting idly on massive, full-breeched thighs. The nails showed the gentleman, but the rest—and especially the long scar, grey-white against the brown—hinted at the man of action.

The play went on. It got interesting again. The audience settled down, the gentlemen let their pipes go out unheeded. Nicky leant forward on the edge of the bench, elbows on the balustrade, hands pressed against his flushed cheeks. He loved plays. They meant escape—escape from the dark house in Knightrider Street, and his father's solemn friends, and the dusty school-hall, and the master's stick—escape from all these, if only for an hour or two, into a magic land of romance and adventure, where the very names spoken were like spells.

Africa, Argier, Tunis, Inde, Arabia . . .

A seagull swooped suddenly over the roofless theatre, uttering its harsh cry. Lucky seagull, he thought, you can fly to these places if you want to.

There was an interval soon after that. Fiddlers came on and played, but no one listened. Nicky's neighbour turned with a smile and offered him an orange.

"What d'ye think of the play, my lad?"

"Very good, sir." Nicky's eyes sparkled above the golden curve of the orange, which he was sucking as quietly as he could.

"Thought it a bit slow, myself. They keep drawing their swords, but they haven't shown us much fencing yet."

"It's because they're enchanted, sir. If you want fighting, though, you should see *Macbeth*, or *King Lear*. They're by the same man."

"Ay, I've heard of 'em, but I was out of London when they were done."

"Yes, sir. Excuse me, sir, but do you come from Devon?"

The man laughed. "You've a sharp ear for an accent, eh? Yes, I'm a real Devon sea-dog. But I didn't miss those plays because I was cider-drinking at home. I'd have been in Guinea, maybe, or Barbary, or further."

Nicky dropped the orange-skin between his feet and licked his fingers. "Then you've seen Indians?" he inquired in an awed tone.

"Bless your life, yes! Indians, blackamoors, Turks, all sorts!"

"And—were they anything like Caliban?"

"Not very."

Nicky felt disappointed. Luckily, the play was resumed at that moment, so the conversation stopped. He leant forward again, determined not to miss a single word. Visits to the playhouse were apt to be paid for twice—with precious pocket-money for the theatre-seat and with painful strokes for his own. Nicky's father had two mottoes among many others—"Avoid the playhouse for the plague-spot of wickedness that it is," and "Spare the rod and spoil the child." Under these circumstances you needed to enjoy the play thoroughly, or it wasn't worth the chance of a thrashing afterwards. Today, however, Nicky felt more confident. His father was away on business for the whole day, and he knew the old house-keeper could be trusted not to tell.

The play ended. The fiddlers struck up a jig. People

streamed from their places. Nicky came slowly back to the real world. He jumped suddenly and stammered an apology, finding that the gentleman was waiting to pass him.

"That's all right. Which way d'ye go home, boy?"

"By London Bridge, sir. I live in Knightrider Street."

"That's a mighty roundabout way. I've a boat waiting. I can drop you ashore at Queen Hythe, if you like, and then it's only a short step."

"That's very good of you, sir."

They walked through the narrow streets of Southwark together, and found the boat bobbing with a dozen others at the landing-steps. It was a ship's boat, the boy noticed, and the two men who rowed it were tanned, ear-ringed, and tattooed. Even the short trip across the Thames, in such company, had the flavour of romance.

"What's your name, boy? How old are you?"

"Fifteen, sir. Nicholas Fowler."

"Is your father Nathaniel Fowler, the draper?"

"Yes, sir."

The Devon man let out a long, deep-chested chuckle. "And how does Nat Fowler like his son visiting the playhouse?"

"Not much, sir—when he knows. He's rather—strict."

"A regular Puritan, by all accounts! Ah well, if no son ever disobeyed his dad, the world wouldn't move far. Fifteen. . . . H'm. . . . And what d'ye want to be, Nicholas?"

Nicky hesitated. "I—I don't quite know."

"An actor? You seem mighty well up in the plays."

Nicky shook his head. "I don't want to spend all my life saying other men's words. I'd like—I'd like to travel and see the world for myself," he ended vaguely.

"So would most lads, but I can't see a draper sending his boy on the Grand Tour of Europe. Still, you never know. Here we are at Queen Hythe. Steady! Out you hop!"

Nicky hopped. Then he turned, cap in hand, and stammered his thanks. The gentleman acknowledged them with a careless wave of the hand, and the oarsmen sent the boat darting back into midstream.

"I suppose you don't happen to know who that was?" Nicky asked one of the watermen.

"Ay, reckon we all know him. Captain William Hawkins, that be, going back to his ship, the *Hector*. She's moored off Billingsgate."

"Thank you."

Nicky stood, his eyes following the boat until it shot from sight beneath the gloomy arches of London Bridge. William Hawkins—nephew of the great Sir John, and partner in some of his ventures! And he, Nicky Fowler, had "sailed" under his command, if it was only across the Thames from Southwark to the City! It had certainly been an exciting day.

Nor were the excitements concluded yet.

The tall, narrow-fronted house was silent except for the distant clatter of pots and pans in the kitchen. It was dark, too. Early as it was, the sun had already slanted down behind the gables and chimneys of the houses opposite, and the parlour, panelled with black oak which had been there since Richard the Third's time, had a twilight gloom. Nicky peered round the door and breathed again. It was all right. His father was not

there, nor was he in the shop below. He hadn't got home yet.

Splendid! It would be a good idea to go upstairs and sit down to his books, as though he had been there for hours . . .

He sang as he went up to his bedroom, a fragment of a song from the play which had caught his fancy because of the picture it conjured up of far-off seas, green and clear:

*"Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made—"*

The song died on his lips as he crossed the threshold, and for a sinful moment he wished that his own father could be sunk, five fathom deep, with Ferdinand's.

For facing him, across a table strewn with books and papers, his dour face pursed into an expression of righteous disapproval, was Mr. Nathaniel Fowler.

Will Shakespeare's tempest was a weak thing compared with the storm that then burst out.

CHAPTER II

FORTUNE MY FOE

It was almost five minutes before Nicky discovered the precise cause of his parent's anger. After a flood of general denunciation, illustrated by numerous texts, Mr. Fowler flung a scrap of paper across the table.

"What d'ye mean by *this*, eh?"

Nicky blushed. "I was trying to teach myself Portuguese—"

"Portuguese?" The draper rolled his eyes whitely to the beamed ceiling. "So you're not satisfied with what they teach you at St. Paul's? You've so completely mastered Latin and Greek and Hebrew that you must fritter your time on a barbarous Papistical lingo like Portuguese! Well, what d'ye say? Have you so got the gift of tongues that you can't utter a syllable in your own language?"

"I'm sorry, father. I know my schoolwork's pretty weak, still, but I don't feel so keen about the dead languages. This Portuguese is different. It'll be useful." Nicky's eyes shone with enthusiasm. "Portuguese—and Spanish—will take you anywhere."

"But you're not going anywhere," interrupted his father with a snort.

"Not just now, perhaps," he agreed nervously.

"Which brings us to another question: where have you been these last few hours?"

There was no hope of deceiving those stern grey eyes. Nicky told the truth, and, as he had feared, caused another explosion.

"The playhouse! I might have known it. And the next thing will be drink and cards and tobacco—and maybe worse. I won't have it, Nicholas, I won't have it, d'ye hear? Go to my room and fetch my stick. You know where to find it," he added with a twitch of his lips.

Nicholas did not budge. "I'm sorry, father, but—I'm too old to be thrashed any more."

"Oh?" Nathaniel Fowler rose slowly to his feet and leant across the table. "Nicholas, you will do as your father says." His voice was quiet now, silky almost. . . .

Nicholas stood, his colour coming and going. He realized, suddenly, that he was almost as tall as his father, thinner, but wirier, probably quite as strong. "I'm sorry," he repeated.

"You disobey me?"

"N-no. Yes. I mean, I'm old enough now to—"

"Very well." To his surprise, Mr. Fowler sank back on to his seat. "Perhaps you are right, Nicholas, perhaps you are right."

Nicky could scarcely believe his ears. Never had he heard such words from his father.

"You are too old to be running wild in London," went on the draper, staring at the ceiling again. "The city is full of vices and temptations, and you are weak-willed, easily led astray. You are old enough now for a plan I have had in my mind for a long time. I shall send you away—"

Nicky's heart jumped with mingled hope and fear, but he dared not interrupt. The cold voice continued:

"—To a city where at least there are no playhouses, and where actors are rightly treated as the rogues and vagabonds they are."

Where did he mean? Was he going to send Nicky, as an apprentice perhaps, to one of those grey, Puritan cities of Northern Europe, where there was no fun to be had except skating on the sea?

"I mean," went on Mr. Fowler, fixing him with a bleak look, "the City of Oxford. I shall write tomorrow and ask if you can be entered at St. John the Baptist's College."

Nicky's heart leapt again. Oxford, even without a play-house, would be marvellous. Some of his friends from St. Paul's School would be there. . . . He felt fond of his father again.

"You appear pleased, Nicholas?"

"Yes, father. I'd love to go to the University. It—it's very good of you."

"Then that's settled." The draper stood up and came round the table with outstretched hand. "It will be a proud day," he said solemnly, "when you take your degree."

"Ye-es, father." Nicky's mind had been running on other aspects of Oxford life. A new thought struck him. "Shall I be able to drop Hebrew?"

"Of course not! How can you study Divinity without Hebrew? How can you expound the Scriptures unless you can read them in the original languages?"

"Have I got to expound the Scriptures?" Nicky's jaw dropped in dismay.

"Naturally, boy, naturally. As a minister of the Gospel. Didn't I make that clear? I'm sending you to Oxford so that you can become a minister."

"You mean—I can only go if I decide to be a parson?" wailed Nicky, seeing the bright vision fade before his eyes.

This time it was his father who stared. "Most certainly I mean that. Or rather, there is no need for you to decide. I have decided for you."

"But—"

"Years ago," explained Mr. Fowler, "when your mother died, and I knew I should never have more than the one son, I made a solemn resolution—that I would give my only son to the service of the Church. Heaven knows," he added, "the ministry stands badly enough in need of sound young men. The Church is drifting more and more into the hands of people who are little better than Papists. It's all surplices and ceremonies, and no true religion. But we'll strike a blow at all that, Nicholas. It's been the greatest sorrow of my life that when I was young, like you, I had no chance to take Holy Orders. Never mind," he smiled, "you shall do what I couldn't. I shall fulfil myself through my son."

"I'm sorry, father. I'd love to go to Oxford, but I don't think I want to be a parson."

"Nicholas, you are in a very stubborn and stiffnecked mood this evening. Let me tell you plainly: that letter to St. John's College will not be written until I have your solemn promise that you will do as I wish."

"But—I'm not old enough to decide a big thing like that. It's my whole life."

"That is why I have decided for you."

There was something very alarming in his quiet, level tones. Nicky knew his father, and knew that he must be speaking under tremendous self-restraint. If that restraint was tested to breaking-point, there would be real trouble—trouble beyond mere words and blows, trouble bigger than anything he could remember.

But he knew also that he was at one of the cross-roads

of his life. If he let someone else, even his own father, choose the way for him, he would forever afterwards be wishing that he had taken another turning.

He must be firm. He must stand up to this terrifying man with the white, drawn face and the compelling eyes.

"I've no right to promise a thing like that. I don't feel any call."

"Be careful, Nicholas! Remember, it was *I* who first made the promise on your behalf—a solemn covenant—"

"You'd no right, either! People must speak for themselves in a thing like this. Anyhow, you can't force me, and I'm not going to, so that's that."

Mr. Fowler flinched as if from a blow in the face. Then he stepped a pace nearer and thrust out his jaw, showing his yellow, uneven teeth.

"No, Nicholas, I can't force you, can I? I must leave that to your own conscience, to your sense of filial duty, to your ideas of gratitude—if you have any. But just tell me, if you are not going to become a minister, what career do you propose to take up? I'm not going to keep you at school any longer. As you say, you are old enough now—old enough to fend for yourself."

"I—I don't know, father. I hadn't thought. It's all so sudden. You won't let me go to Oxford all the same?"

"I have said not."

"Then I s'pose it'll have to be business of some sort."

"Of what sort precisely?"

"I don't mind very much. Something connected with foreign trade wouldn't be so bad. Silk, or spices, or wines." Nicky coughed hurriedly and tried to cover up the last word.

"You realize that all these trades involve apprenticeship? That you would not be earning your keep for years and years? I have no money to waste on you in that way."

Nicky bit his lip. He saw which way the wind was veering. His father, he felt pretty sure, was comfortably wealthy. Certainly, if he could afford to send his son to Oxford, he could afford to apprentice him in the City. It was all an excuse to bully him into obedience.

"Very well, father," he said as coolly as possible, "we could save that expense if I went into the drapery—I could be apprenticed to *you*, then."

"I have no desire to have you in the business. My journeymen and apprentices respect my wishes. I don't want to upset them by introducing a rebellious element."

"Then . . ." Nicky hesitated. He had an unpleasant feeling that he was being driven into a corner. "I s'pose I can find *something*," he said vaguely.

"England is already full of unemployed men. Things are no better abroad." His father smiled a thin-lipped, triumphant smile. "Think it over well, Nicholas. I shall take you away from school at the end of this term. You can choose: either you respect my wishes, promise to fulfil them, and go up to the University; or you walk out of this house for ever, and fend for yourself."

"You're joking, father, surely?"

"I never felt less like joking. Let me make myself perfectly clear. If you oppose me still—and I do not fancy for a moment you will, when you have considered the consequences—I shall no longer regard you as a son of mine. This house will be closed to you. I shall warn your uncles, and all the friends of the family, to do nothing for you. If they do, I shall take it as a personal

insult, an unforgivable interference between parent and child."

"You mean—if I won't do as you want, you'd sooner see me starve?"

The draper shrugged his shoulders. "I don't imagine it would come to that. You've more wilfulness than will. If you think it over, you'll see reason."

The blood flamed to the boy's face. "You think I'm afraid then? I'll show you. Cut me off with a shilling if you want to! I'll make my own way—"

"Fine words! They'd ring well in the playhouse, wouldn't they? Better than in real life! Words won't feed and clothe you." Mr. Fowler strode to the door. "I shall say no more, Nicholas, until I have received your apologies. When you have cooled down, you will be sorry for all this."

"I shan't!"

The door closed softly, the measured tread faded down the broad staircase. Nicky flung himself on the window-seat and stared miserably out. The sunset sky was angry and foreboding like his own future.

"I'll show him," he muttered. Under his breath he began to sing a popular song from the theatre:

"Fortune, my foe, where art thou calling me? . . ."

A seagull wheeled screaming over the housetops. Its cry was like an answer.

CHAPTER III

HAWKINS OF THE "HECTOR"

"PLEASE—can I see Captain Hawkins, please?"

The moment had come at last, the moment he had been imagining all the long day at school, and most of the night before. It was not surprising that he had gone through his lessons with a dazed, faraway look, and that the usher had stormed at him for inattention. He had been counting the hours—and finally even the minutes—which must pass before he would be free to run down to Billingsgate and ask for his acquaintance of the previous day.

And now, at last, the *Hector* towered before him, her bare masts black against the evening sky, and the tide slapping and gurgling against her side. He had a queer empty sensation in his stomach as he trod the gang-plank, and jumped down on to the echoing deck.

"Why?"

The question was almost roared at him by a great tub of a man who was lounging against the bulwarks, chewing tobacco with rhythmic movements of his bewiskered jaws.

"I—I beg your pardon?"

The man shifted the tobacco into his cheek to facilitate conversation. "There's a reason for everything," he rumbled. "My old dad always taught me to ask questions. And contrariwise to popular opinion, I ha'n't been told too many lies." He glared terrifyingly. "Leastways,

not twice by the same person!" His face relaxed suddenly into a grin which exposed a row of brown-stained teeth, conspicuous for the number of absentees. The grin encouraged Nicky.

"Didn't your old dad teach you to answer questions, too?" he inquired.

The seaman shook his head mournfully. "Nay. 'One thing at a time' was his motto, an' he never got on to that. Died young, did my poor old dad. And do you know"—he thrust out a long brown finger and poked the air solemnly to emphasize each word—"for years his body remained in the most remarkable state o' preservation, pickled in the alcohol he'd drunk during his life!"

"I can quite believe it," said Nicky, who could not. It didn't seem much use asking questions of this peculiar person, so he decided to try the effect of a statement instead. "I want to see Captain Hawkins," he said politely but firmly. "On private business."

"Then why couldn't you say so before? Don't you know how the Captain abominates being kept waiting? Andrew!"

"Ay, ay, bo'sun!" A bare-foot boy appeared from nowhere and came padding across the deck.

"Find the Cap'n, Ginger-nob, and tell him there's a young gentleman to see him. On business. What's your name, sir? Nicholas Fowler? Tell him that, Ginger-nob." The boy fled. The bo'sun turned his gap-toothed smile to Nicky again. "Won't be more'n a brace o' shakes. You're lucky to find the Captain aboard, for he's ashore dining, most days. I'd show you my crocodile, just to pass the time—reckon you've never seen a crocodile, eh?"

"No. I—I'd like to very much."

"Pity it's such a chilly evening," rumbled the bo'sun wistfully.

"Yes. I suppose crocodiles can't stand our climate very well?"

"Well, it's like this, Master Fowler. It's myself—I catch my death o' cold so easy, after sailing most o' my life in southern parts. The animal afore-mentioned is embroidered—tattooed, as they call it—all down my back and up my spine. Of course, I've never seen it myself," he added more wistfully than ever, "but by all accounts it's a proper work of art. I'll show it you another day—"

The red-headed boy appeared suddenly. "Will ye step aft, sir? Cap'n Hawkins'll see you in a minute if ye'll wait in his cabin."

"Thank you. Er—goodbye, bo'sun. I'd love to see your crocodile another time."

"You're welcome, boy. A thing o' beauty should be shared by all."

Ginger-nob led the way without speaking, and presently Nicky found himself alone in a spacious cabin, panelled and carpeted, with a great bow-window of tiny panes, through which he could peer down-river at the sombre mass of the Tower, rising from the water's edge. He hadn't time to notice more than the big brown globe on its pedestal and the crinkled charts before the door opened and Captain Hawkins entered.

"Hullo, lad! Welcome to 'our royal, good, and gallant ship'—remember where that comes from?"

"The play yesterday!"

"That's right." Hawkins sat down and stroked his fair, pointed little beard. "Well, what can I do for you?"

"It's like this, sir . . ." Nicky poured out his story,

the words falling over each other in his eagerness, till the man smiled and raised his hand.

"Easy, my lad. You're like wine poppling out of the flagon . . . I think I see what you're after. You want to land me into the most dreadful trouble, and give me a bad name throughout the City of London—for encouraging a respectable merchant's son to run away to sea. Sorry, lad, but it can't be done."

"That's not quite right, sir. My father's turning me out, he says. He can't object to my earning an honest livelihood as best I can."

Hawkins gave one of his deep-chested chuckles. "It's a very debatable point whether *anyone* can earn an honest livelihood on the high seas. However . . . even supposing you came with your father's blessing, what use would you be to me?"

"You need boys aboard ship——"

"Yes, but I pick 'em from Plymouth and Torbay and sometimes Bristol—boys who've grown up with the fishing fleets. Whereas I don't suppose you know one mast from another, do you?"

"Yes, sir. The *Hector's* got four. From front to back—I mean, from bow to stern—they go: fore-mast, main-mast, mizzen, and bonaventure mizzen."

"Good!"

"I'm afraid," said Nicky conscientiously, "there isn't a boy in London who couldn't tell you that."

"Glad you admit it, anyhow." Hawkins considered for a moment, drumming on the polished table with his ringed hand. "What accomplishments *have* you—since you're obviously not a seaman?" he demanded abruptly.

"Acc—accomplishments?" stammered Nicky. "I can play the harp a bit, and sing. . . ."

Hawkins controlled his features with difficulty. "Very useful," he said gravely. "And no doubt you write Greek verses very prettily? That would come in *very* handy."

"No, sir, but I know a little Portuguese, and I can soon learn a lot more!"

"Portuguese, eh?" Hawkins sat upright. "An enterprising youth! You like foreign languages?"

"Only when there's some chance to speak 'em, sir."

Hawkins stretched out his arm, opened a book, and thrust it under the boy's nose. "What d'ye make of that?"

"I can't read a word—even the letters are queer. Neither Roman nor Greek nor Hebrew."

"No, it's Turki—one of the lingoes they speak in India." Hawkins smiled wryly. "I'm battling with the stuff myself."

Nicky raised his brown eyes from the elaborate writing and fixed them on the Captain with admiration.

"You never mean to say, sir, you're going to India—in the *Hector*?"

"Why not?" But Hawkins looked delighted by the question.

"But, sir—no English ship has ever reached India!"

"No." Hawkins stood up and stretched his long arms, as if testing his own strength. "But it's high time somebody did. Here's the East India Company been going for years—they started it in 1600 under the old Queen, God bless her—and not one of their vessels has ever traded with the mainland yet. The *Hector's* going to. And that's why, for my sins, I must go to school again and stew over this heathen lingo. Even the writing of it twists hither and thither like a nightmare of snakes."

"India," murmured Nicky spell-bound. The fabulous

land of gems and spices, where even the air was scented with cloves and cinnamon!

"You like the idea?" queried Hawkins with a smile. "Tell me, Nicky: can you write a good hand—in English, I mean? Can you figure?"

"Of course, sir."

"You could keep simple accounts, I suppose? You know the kind of thing—so many bales of cloth, so many bags of pepper, such and such a payment for stores at such and such a port? All that niggling sort of arithmetic?"

"It sounds easy enough."

"All right. You can come as a clerk, then—secretary, if you think it sounds better."

"You mean that, sir—really, to India?"

"Unless we feed the fishes first." Hawkins put out his hand solemnly. "I'll have a word with your father. Must have everything above-board. Remember, I'm commissioned for this voyage by the East India Company, and I daren't do anything to upset the stock-holders."

"When do we sail, sir?"

"In ten days' time, wind and weather permitting. On a most significant and ominous date"—Hawkins paused to chuckle—"April 1st, my boy!"

CHAPTER IV

PERIL ON THE SEA

APRIL, 1607 . . . and the great globe of the world turning, tilting each hour fresh countries and oceans to the brilliance of the sun. Grey seas and green seas, blue waters and silver—and over them all the same white birds wheeling and crying, the same white sails dipping and tossing, staggering from continent to continent, tinier and weaker by comparison than the smallest insect, struggling across the surface of the water-butt. But this is the generation of adventure. Hudson and Hawkins, Baffin and Adams follow the beckoning shades of Willoughby, Chancellor, Frobisher, Davis, Drake . . . the North-east Passage and the North-west, Muscovy and Morocco, the Spice Islands, China, Japan—wherever the perils and profits are generously mixed, wherever death can be cheated and dividends won, the merchant venturers send out their argosies.

For that reason the *Hector* is scudding down the coast of Portugal, with the sea-birds wreathing her mast-heads, and the hopeful sharks in her wake. For that reason she has a consort, now a mere speck on the northward horizon. The two vessels, neither of a thousand tons, yet crammed with an extraordinary variety of English goods, together make up what is known in City business circles as the Third Voyage of the East India Company. . . .

"Come on, Fowler, it's blown itself out now. You'll feel different once you get on deck. It's fresh air you need."

Nicky opened weary eyes and looked round the tiny cabin. His head ached. There was a bitter taste in his mouth. The past two or three days had been one long nightmare.

"Leave me alone," he muttered unhappily.

"You *are* a landlubber," said John Rose, laughing. He was bending over Nicky. When he straightened himself, and flung back his mop-like head, he caught it a resounding bang on the lantern. Nicky smiled for the first time since the weather broke. Served the great lout right! He must be nearly as tall as the West Country church-towers he was always boasting about.

"Laugh, would you?" inquired Rose ferociously. "I'll teach you, you pasty-faced little Londoner! Out you come."

Nicky felt himself grasped roughly by the arm and shoulder, and dragged to his feet. He closed his eyes sickly and swayed. He was too weak to resist. The lanky Devon boy propelled him expertly up a ladder and sent him reeling across the deck. "There you are, bo'sun! Something to feed the sharks with."

Nicky heard a vague rumbling overhead, like a distant thunderstorm. He opened his eyes once more and saw the round red face of the bo'sun looming over him like the midday sun.

"Feelin' a trifle indisposed still, are ye?"

"I'll be all right in a minute. I feel a bit empty, that's all."

"Empty? And is that surprising, midear?" The bo'sun's speech became more and more broadly Devonian as his sympathies were roused. "We'll soon deal with that."

"Give him a flick with the rope's end—that's what he

wants. Chase him forrad," suggested the other youth unkindly.

"When I want your advice, I'll ask for it! Be off with ye, jackanapes, or it's you will get the chasing. Come along, midear, and let's see what we can find."

He gave Nicky his arm and they lurched aft together. A savoury smell, growing stronger every moment, showed they were near to the cook's galley. This, following on the effect of the fresh breeze with its salty tang, produced a quick change in Nicky's condition. For the first time in three days he felt ravenously hungry.

"Cookie midear! A nice plate o' something filling for the young gentleman! And don't snivel that it's two hours still to dinner-time. Make something!"

"Ay, ay, bo'sun, leave it to me." The diminutive cook seized a fork and prodded the contents of an immense pan. "Here's a bit that's done. . . . Here's another. . . . Catch hold o' the platter, bo'sun."

Five minutes later, with a large helping of beef stew to warm the lining of his stomach, Nicky felt more in love with life. After a further helping, and a hunk of bread and cheese, he felt really happy.

"Do you treat everyone like this?" he inquired.

Bo'sun and cook exchanged glances.

"Do we, cookie?"

"Do we not, bo'sun?"

The bo'sun's laugh rumbled through the galley. "Nay, midear, we'd have our hands full, with a company of two or three hundred aboard. We look on you as a visitor, so to speak. Captain's secretary—bless your life! You're no common sailorman like cookie and me." The cook's high giggle rang out like the triumphant cry of a hen which had laid an egg. "Which reminds me, midear,

now you're up and doing, you'd best report to Captain."

"In his cabin?"

"Nay, where would you find the captain of a ship? On the poop—yonder!"

To reach the poop was quite an adventure—almost like climbing a mountain, except that the mountain would not keep still, and rolled and reeled in a most disconcerting manner. One steep ladder led to another. By the time Nicky had clambered from the main deck to the half-deck, and thence to the quarter-deck, and finally to the poop itself, he was panting for breath.

Hawkins stood there, his hands on the carved bulwarks, his eyes on the distance. The lateen sail cut a dark shadow across his face, so that only his beard shone in the sunlight. He turned at Nicky's footstep.

"Hullo, Nicholas! I've missed you at table. Getting your sea-legs?"

"Gradually, sir."

"Splendid. Noticed the enemy over there?"

"Enemy?" Nicky gasped. There was no other sail in view, except their own consort's, far astern.

Hawkins waved his hand towards the long grey smudge lining the horizon to port. "That. Portugal."

"But surely, sir, we're at peace—"

"Yes, yes—officially. We were at peace with Spain, officially, when Cousin Francis burnt their fleet in Cadiz harbour. Eh, diplomacy's a wonderful thing! Kings and queens keep up the pretence of peace, while all the time their subjects are cutting each other's throats. Bess used to carry it off with an air, so that you couldn't help admire the cheek of the woman, but this James. . . ." He shrugged his shoulders with a gesture of disgust.

"What can you expect from a Scot? Meanness and hypocrisy! But there, I didn't mean to talk treason on the high seas. We were speaking of Portugal."

"Yes, sir. Why is she our enemy? Surely there's no fear of their attacking us, like the Armada?"

"I don't think so. Though, mark you, Portugal's right under the thumb of Spain—has been these twenty-five years or more. You can't remember when there was a separate King of Portugal? No. Well, this is the point: in those days the Pope divided the world into half. The Spaniards were to have a free hand in the West and the Portuguese in the East—and not an acre of the new lands for the English or Dutch, because of their heresy."

"We're not bound by what the Pope says."

"No. And less now than ever—because the union of Spain and Portugal means they're trying to hold the entire New World, America, India, and the lot, against all comers."

"That's not fair."

"They even want to stop us trading, let alone colonizing and owning land."

"It seems a dog-in-the-manger kind of attitude."

"Exactly." Hawkins studied his finger-nails thoughtfully. "Sooner or later we shall have to fight them. Meanwhile, we're building up our trade bit by bit. They're fighting the Dutch as it is, so they've got their hands full and daren't touch us for the moment. India's worth a war," he said with sudden enthusiasm. "People in England don't realize. They talk of nothing but America, America. Even the East India Company talks of the Red Sea trade and Java and Sumatra—anything but Hindustan itself. We're going to show 'em, Nicky!"

We're going to get our fingers into India, and we shan't let go. It'll be the making of us—maybe the making of England."

His excitement was infectious. Nicky listened, fascinated. In his mind's eye arose a picture of the vast fabulous country, where the Great Mogul sat enthroned on jewels, where armoured elephants fought like the beasts in the arenas of pagan Rome, and solitary white adventurers stalked fearlessly amid the myriad brown barbarians. It was not an accurate picture, but it was extremely attractive. He scowled at the Portuguese coastline, remembering that these presumptuous Papists wanted to exclude Englishmen from any share in these wonders. In fact, so strongly did he fall under the spell of Hawkins' words that he began his study of Turki that very same evening.

The next few days were extremely pleasant—especially for Nicky. Others might grumble at the almost unruffled calm and the absence of more than a languid little breeze, wafting them so leisurely down the coast of Portugal, but Nicky thought it much preferable to the howling gales and mountainous seas they had encountered in the Channel and the Bay of Biscay. What was the hurry? It was all new and exciting.

"A lot you know about it!" growled his cabin-mate disgustedly. "We want to make the African coast before our water runs too low. You don't suppose Hawkins wants to touch at a Portuguese port, do you?"

"I hadn't thought of that."

John Rose was the one fly in the ointment—a lanky, bony fly, with sulky eyes and a derisive laugh. He had soon shown quite plainly what he thought of his companion. Nicky was a landlubber, a Londoner who ought

by rights to have been wielding the scissors and the yard-measure amid his father's drapery. John was the youngest son of a Devon squire near Lynmouth, a proper sea-dog, coming of a line that had been sea-dogs since the days when the Vikings swept the Bristol Channel, and the English sailed over with Strongbow to the conquest of Ireland.

"You don't think of much, do you?" he said. "Except swotting heathen lingoes in the Captain's cabin, and making yourself his little favourite!"

"That's not fair. Anyhow, when we get to India, we'll need someone who can do something else besides knotting ropes."

"Now don't you go and annoy me," said the Devon youth menacingly. "Hawkins won't have fighting aboard ship, but I reckon he wouldn't count this fighting." He eyed Nicky scornfully. "You keep quiet or you'll feel a knotted rope where it hurts most. Or I'll tie a knot in *you*—only I don't waste time over bits of chewed string."

Nicky shrugged his shoulders and was silent, partly because he couldn't think of anything to say, partly because it would have been unwise to say it (John was a year older and a good three inches taller), and partly because in his heart he admired him. John had wonderful muscles, and, even though he hadn't much of a brain, he knew all there was to be known about ships. And he had a dolphin tattooed in blue on his left forearm—not so magnificent, of course, as the bo'sun's crocodile, but quite a promising start for one so young.

Nicky wished they could be friends.

The fair weather continued. The *Hector* crept on, her bows cutting the blue water with scarcely a ripple. Not

all Hawkins' seamanship could make much progress in such a calm. Portugal had fallen behind, but as yet there was no sign of Africa.

Their consort was no longer even a speck on the horizon. They were alone on a vast mill-pond.

"Very tedious," said Hawkins at dinner.

"How's the water, sir?" asked John.

"Low. We'll have to make the coast somehow, and sooner than we meant."

"What shall we do," Nicky inquired, "if there's still no wind?"

"Lower the boats and tow her." Hawkins made a wry face. "Not much fun in this heat, eh? Better than thirst though. Still, I hope it won't come to that."

It did. The calm remained unbroken. The ship lay in a bowl of hot, shimmering, dazzling blue: the cloudless sky arching overhead, and the unrippled Atlantic spreading away to the veils of mist which hid the horizon. Towards evening Hawkins ordered a couple of boats to be lowered. John went in one of them. Nicky hung about, waiting to be asked, but no one took any notice of him.

The men rowed till midnight, and the ship made some progress, but daylight brought no glimpse of land. The boats were lowered again with fresh crews. Hawkins ordered them in again after a few hours. The midday sun was more than any man could stand.

Water was strictly rationed that day. Towards dusk the rowing was resumed. Still no sign of land.

"I suppose there's no *danger*?" Nicky asked as casually as he could.

"Danger?" Hawkins echoed. "From thirst, you mean?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, no. We know where we are, pretty near. We're bound to strike the African coast soon, and we'll find a river-mouth, or springs anyhow. No, there's no danger from thirst."

He laid a slight emphasis on the last word. There was an awkward silence. The word seemed to hang in the stifling air of the cabin, like a vibration which continues after a sound has ceased. Nicky wondered if there was some other danger, apart from the shortage of water. But Hawkins was frowning over the chart again, and he did not like to tax him with further questions.

The wearisome towing continued all the next day. Hawkins never quitted the poop, except for the few minutes necessary to snatch a bite of food. He paced the sun-blistered planks like a caged lion, his plumed hat tilted forward to shade his eyes, which never ceased to scan the heat-haze in front.

Nicky went up and found him there. The cabin had become like an oven. He could no longer keep his mind on Portuguese or Turki, or the re-checking of endless lists of stores. "Is there anything I can do, sir?"

"Eh? Do? You?" Hawkins turned with a slightly irritable gesture. "What could you do?"

"I'd like to take my turn at an oar—"

"Nay, lad, you must fill out a bit before you can do that. But I'll tell you what—you can sing."

"Sing, sir?" Nicky stared suspiciously.

"Yes, something with a swing to it. It'll help the men along. They'll be changing over presently, so you can hop in when they come alongside."

So Nicky found himself swarming down the rope-ladder after John Rose, and Timothy Wells the bo'sun,

and the rest of the boat-crew. They had all stripped to the waist, though it was forbidden to uncover the head. Most of the men had vividly coloured kerchiefs, but Nicky was heartily glad of his black-brimmed hat with its saucy little red feather. Hot it might be—the bo'sun called it a dish-cover and prophesied that a roasted sheep's head would be found underneath when it was lifted—but anyhow it cast a little shade over his eyes.

Nicky sang, and the men pulled with a will. It was fun at first, racking his brains for rollicking tunes, and then finding they were much too fast, and trying to think of something more suitable.

But gradually his throat became drier and drier, and he had to lick his lips between every verse. The men were still pulling tirelessly, John handling his oar with the rest, and the ship came gliding slowly after them, like a dead thing.

He wanted to ask how much longer, but was ashamed to. He knew John would laugh and cry: "We've only just started."

He wanted to ask if there was any water in the boat, but he felt sure there was not. The merest drop, just to moisten his throat, would have been precious.

He sang on in a husky, cracked voice:

"Drink to me only with thine eyes—"

"For mercy's sake," wailed the bo'sun, "why of all things must ye sing of drink? What wouldn't I give for a jug o' cider in a cool farm-kitchen in Devon?"

There was a general laugh. Nicky stopped Jonson's song, and said, with a grin: "Would you prefer this, bo'sun?"

'When that I was a little tiny boy,
With a hey, ho, the wind and the rain——'"

But the bo'sun's preference was never known. For at that moment a voice came thin and clear across the water from high at the mast-head:

"Land on the port bow!"

Land! The rowers stopped with exclamations of relief. Nicky, sitting in the stern, strained his eyes but could see nothing beyond the same heat mist, low over the water, which had now enshrouded them for days. Timothy did not trouble even to turn his head.

"We'll not be seeing anything yet, midear, if it's only just been sighted by the look-out man. Come on, lads, down to it again. Land over there's no good to us. We've got to reach it. All together, now!"

The two boats crept forward again. The hawsers tightened, the ship's nose came round, she began to glide in their wake.

"Shouldn't be far," puffed Timothy. "Not even the look-out would see a great distance on a day like this."

"They're shouting—on board the *Hector*, I mean," said Nicky suddenly, looking round. "Are they calling to us?"

"Nay, 'tis Captain giving orders. He sounds excited like. And—now why do they want to go and sound a trumpet?"

"That's for the musketeers," said John Rose in a queer, strained voice. "And hark! That's the drum beating to quarters!"

"Well, I never in all my born days——"

Boom!

A wreath of smoke was curling along the ship's side,

slowly unrolling from one of the port-holes. A shot whistled through the air, far to the left of them, and splashed into the water behind the haze.

"Here," said the bo'sun, "who are they firing at?"

A stentorian voice came rolling across to them from the *Hector*.

"Boats, ahoy! Back to the ship—if you value your lives!"

CHAPTER V

PIRATES!

FOR once in his life Timothy Wells did not stop to ask questions. He gave a sharp order. The boat came round, the hawser now trailing slackly behind. The rowers bent to their oars. Turning his head, Nicky saw that the other boat was racing back.

Meanwhile, all the port-holes along the ship's side had flown open, and guns were being run forward. One by one the bright brass muzzles came peeping into view. He could see the glint of helmets and pikes above the bulwarks. . . .

Two more cannon-balls whizzed through the air. This time they were answered by a blood-curdling yell. A shower of musket-bullets peppered the sea. All round the boats the water rose in little spouts. Plop, plop! It was like rain.

Nicky twisted in his seat and looked back. He could see shadowy forms now, stealing out of the haze. Long, low galleys, crowded with men.

"Barbary pirates!" grunted Timothy. "And we haven't so much as a tooth-pick in the boat. Put your backs into it, midears!"

It was lucky that the distance to the ship was so short, because the oarsmen were weary and the pirates were coming on at a tremendous rate, their light craft fairly skimming across the calm sea. They were barely a hundred yards behind when the two boats reached the *Hector*.

"Take her round the starboard side!" ordered Timothy. It was a wise precaution. Bullets were now spattering the vessel from stem to stern. Climbing the rope-ladder, exposed to such a fire, would have been a ticklish business. As it was, they were sheltered by the ship, and the gunners were free to fire without danger of hitting the boat-crews.

Unfortunately for Nicky, the moment they chose to deliver their broadside was the precise moment when he was scrambling up the rope-ladder. The *Hector* gave a tremendous shudder, followed by a sickening roll. Nicky found himself dangling between heaven and earth—or rather between sky and sea—his foothold lost and his toes drumming against the ship's side.

"Hang on!" yelled John Rose warningly from below. Nicky had no intention of doing anything else if he could help it.

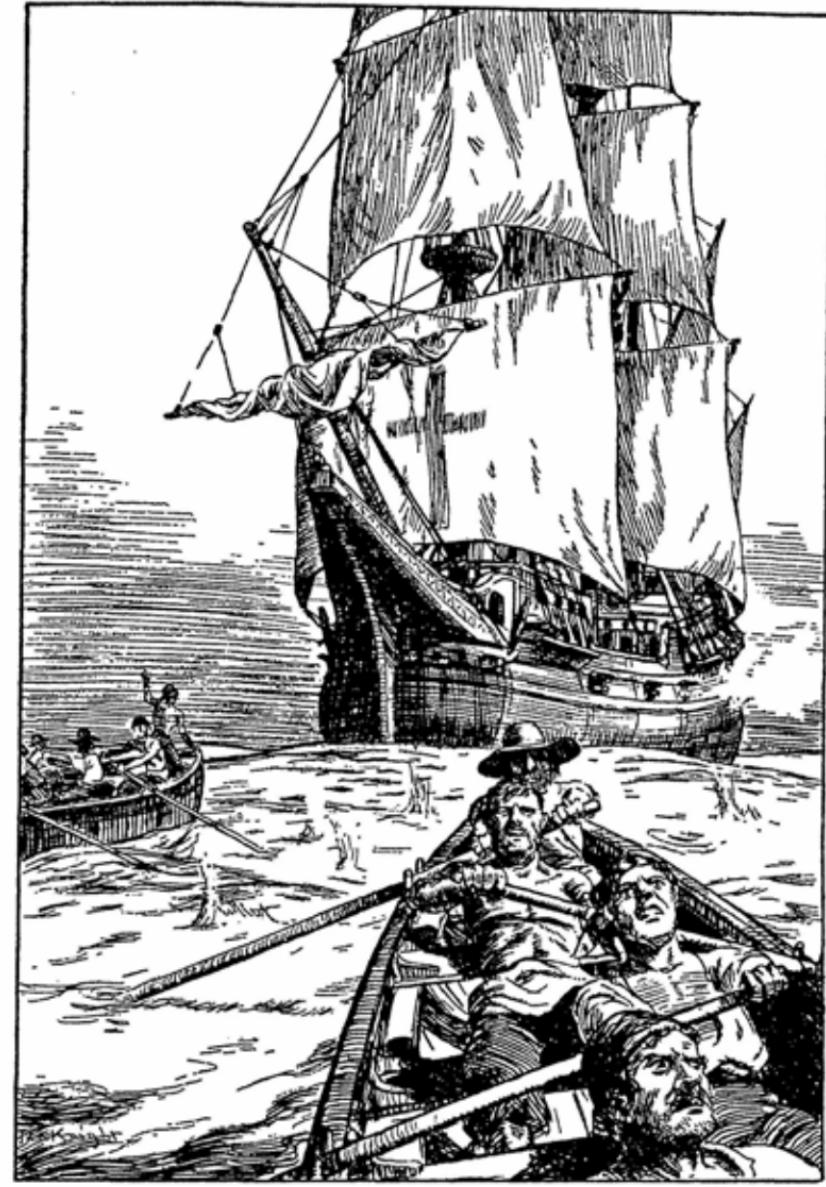
The ladder ceased its mad dance. A rough hand seized his feet, one after the other, and guided them on to the rung.

"Up you go! Don't keep us waiting all day!" Nicky needed no more encouragement. He scrambled up the remaining distance and dropped, with a sigh of relief, to the deck.

He was immediately hustled aft. Sailors were spreading nets across the main-deck—only the one corner by the rope-ladder was still free, and they were waiting impatiently for the boat-crews to get clear.

Musketeers lined the forecastle and the other decks, their long matches burning slowly in their hands. Every half-minute or so, some of them would fire off a volley, and then step back a pace or two to reload.

Behind them clustered the pikemen and the crew,



A SHOWER OF MUSKET-BULLETS PEPPERED THE SEA.



armed mostly with cutlasses. Everyone seemed to know his place except Nicky. He looked round rather disconsolately. Even John Rose had vanished to get his pistols.

Hawkins called him to the poop. "You can stay here, boy. You'll do to run with messages, if need be."

"Yes—I mean, ay, ay, sir."

Nicky peered cautiously over the bulwarks. From his lofty point of vantage he could see the pirate-boats, twenty or more in number, spreading round the ship in a complete oval. Several had been hit. They drifted, water-logged or even upturned, and the surface of the water was broken by the heads of swimmers. But now they were running close alongside, and the gunners could no longer depress the muzzles of their guns enough to aim at them.

"Can't hit a galley at fifty feet!" muttered Hawkins with a wry smile. "It'd be funny if it wasn't serious. If only there was even a capful of wind, we could make rings round them—blow them out of the water one by one. As it is—"

"They're throwing up ropes with hooks on them!" Nicky interrupted excitedly.

"Oh, they mean to board us all right. Look at 'em! Talk about a waggon-load of monkeys!"

"Barbary apes," said Nicky, trying to sound cheerful. But it gave one a nasty feeling to look down and see those brown faces and black beards and those curved, razor-edged scimitars—and to know that in five minutes' time one's acquaintance with them might be much closer.

Hawkins strode to the head of the ladder. "Hack those hooks off!" he bellowed. "Don't stand watching

'em, men—unless you want to see your own liver hanging out!"

"Ay, ay, sir!"

The sailors leapt to the boarding-hooks, striving to disentangle them from the netting, or to saw through the thick ropes attached to them. Sometimes they succeeded. The rope snapped, and the end went snaking back over the bulwarks, hurling half a dozen pirates into the sea. But in other cases there was not time. A dark, grinning face appeared over the side, and a Moor leapt as if from a catapult into the waist of the ship, slashing right and left with his scimitar. Soon there were fifty of them, floundering amid the nets, but resisting all attempts to dislodge them.

"We'll have the whole tribe aboard in no time," said Hawkins between his teeth. He brought his sword whistling from its scabbard. "Musketeers! I want a volley into the thick of 'em, every man who's loaded. After that, it's draw swords and at them." He turned to Nicky. "You stay here." He ran down to the quarter-deck, his sea-boots thundering on the ladder.

The musketeers had swung into line across the half-deck, shoulder to shoulder from bulwark to bulwark. Their volley rang out. Before the smoke had cleared, they whipped out their swords and leapt down into it. Behind them poured the pikes and the cutlasses, like a river pouring over a weir.

"St. George for England!"

That was Hawkins' cry. Nicky saw him thrust his way to the front. His own heart leapt. It was like one of the battles of bygone days, Agincourt or Crécy or Poitiers. Swords and pikes, conical steel helmets, and tossing plumes—

But it was no mere spectacle. It wasn't a tapestry, or a play. It was grim reality. A few weeks before, leaning forward in the gallery of the Globe, he had fancied himself on the poop of a ship. He mustn't let his imagination now play the opposite trick and hold him spellbound. He was in no safe theatre-gallery. If the fight down there went the wrong way, there would be pirates swarming up to the poop, and he himself—

He licked his lips. It was a nasty thought.

Hawkins had told him to stay there. Hawkins wanted him out of harm's way. But he was doing no good where he was, and death was only a little further. It would make no difference in the long run, if the pirates captured the ship. . . .

"They're not going to," he muttered desperately. His mind was made up. He ran down the ladder. There was no one on the quarter-deck, and no sign of a weapon. On the half-deck he saw the muskets and rests, strewn about where the musketeers had thrown them down. No good. But there was one sailor, holding his blood-stained arm, and a cutlass had fallen from his fingers.

Nicky pounced on it and leapt into the fray.

It was all very well to make heroic decisions, but not so easy for a boy of fifteen, rather light for his age, to carry them out. Nicky found himself faced with a solid block of panting, shoving humanity, stumbling backwards and forwards across the deck like a mob of Shrove-tide footballers. Burly shoulders and backs barred his advance—and in every case the shirt or cuirass (or the mere colour of the bare skin) showed that the owner was a friend. Of foes there was no sign, apart from the frenzied yelling and the clash of weapons somewhere just in front.

He found himself saying, time after time, "Let me get at them! Let me get at them!" No one seemed interested.

There was a louder yell from the boarders. Something had happened in front. The crowd reeled back several yards. Nicky went flying into the scuppers, caught his head a crack on the bulwarks, and knew nothing for the next couple of minutes.

He came round slowly, his head throbbing. He raised it painfully from the deck—the deck was not an ideal pillow for a sore head, when it was continually vibrating to the stamp of fighting men and the thud of bodies. He groped round for his cutlass, but could not find it. He felt weak and helpless. He sank back, half closing his eyes.

Was this the end? His first and last adventure, finished almost before the voyage was begun?

He saw the main-mast soaring white and smooth, pricking the blue curtain of the sky; the square sails, massive as clouds; the criss-cross of the rigging, delicate at a distance, almost like lace. . . . A gull flashed across, silvery . . . it all looked so peaceful. But ten yards away there was blood on the deck. He could hear the noise of combat, louder than ever. If he lifted himself on one elbow, and turned his head, he would see them. . . .

But he did not. He lay on his back in the scuppers, gazing up at the sky. And gradually his brown eyes opened wider and a cry rose to his lips.

The limp sails had tautened suddenly. Unheeded by any but himself, they were beginning to flap-flap against the mast!

CHAPTER VI

BLACK IVORY

THE wind had come at last. Every moment it was freshening. It filled the sails. There was a slight tremor as the ship heeled over, then righted herself again.

Had the wind come too late? Nicky staggered to his feet. The battle was raging furiously to and fro across the main-deck. More and more pirates appeared poised for a moment on the bulwarks, and then leapt down into the fray. Soon the ship's company would be outnumbered.

"Captain Hawkins! *Captain Hawkins!*" His cry was lost in the shouting and the clash of steel. Far in front, hopelessly out of reach, he saw the captain's plumed hat bobbing among the white-swathed heads of the Moors. He tried to elbow his way through the press.

Then, to his relief, he identified the bare back in front of him. Broad and brown as a mahogany door, it had a long, blue twisty-tailed crocodile running from shoulder-blade to waist. Nicky slapped his hand down on the crocodile.

"Bo'sun, quick! The wind's springing up!"

Timothy swung round, then cocked an eye aloft, and roared: "Ay, by all that's wonderful, it is! Let me get to the wheel!"

He rushed aft with Nicky on his heels. He seized the wheel in his huge brown paws, cast another glance at the yards, and began to turn it. "It's a hot wind, off the desert—ye can taste the sand," he muttered. "A north-

easter . . . we can run out to sea in front of it, and shake off these devils."

The *Hector* was coming round with a great clatter of canvas. She heeled over at an angle, and the combatants, taken by surprise, went slithering across the deck. There was a shout of triumph from the Englishmen when they realized what was happening, and they flung themselves with redoubled ferocity upon the pirates.

Nicky was hanging over the port bulwarks. "Fine!" he yelled. "Bring her round. We've just smashed one of their boats—we'll catch some more if we're quick."

This new development had filled their assailants with alarm. As the *Hector* swung about, the light galleys were in imminent danger of being capsized. If, on the other hand, they fended themselves off, they left their comrades without a line of retreat, and even, in some cases, dangling from their boarding-ropes.

Nicky turned away from the sickening spectacle of men drowning by dozens in the sea. He felt less pleased than he had done a moment or two before. Of course, it was self-defence, but . . . these men hadn't much chance. Already the water was broken by dark, three-cornered fins. . . .

"Timothy——" he began.

"Ay, ay, midear?" The bo'sun was standing at the wheel, his twinkling eyes fixed on the sails, his hands caressing the polished wood as though it were a live thing.

What Nicky had intended to say was never said. The words froze on his lips. Five yards behind the bo'sun a long-robed Moor was stealthily rising to his feet, and poising his curved blade to strike.

Nicky had by this time reached Timothy's side. Drop-

ping his eyes, he saw a brass-mounted pistol protruding from the sailor's waist-band. Was it still loaded? Or had Timothy fired it before rushing in with his cutlass? Anyhow, it was better than no chance at all.

"Look out!" yelled the boy, and, in that same instant, before Timothy himself could move, he snatched the pistol and snapped it at the pirate. As was so often the way with pistols, nothing happened, but the gesture was enough. Seeing the muzzle levelled at him from point-blank range, the pirate prudently ducked. By the time he had straightened himself, and leapt forward, Timothy had taken in the situation, grabbed his cutlass, and thrown himself into a position of defence.

Cutlass and scimitar clashed together. But the lean Moor was no match for the bull-chested West Countryman. Step by step Timothy drove back his assailant, beating down his guard by sheer weight and violence, and finally sent him reeling against the bulwarks, brown fingers pressed to a spurting gash on his shoulder.

"Watch him," said Timothy coolly, and leapt back to the wheel.

The *Hector* was now running before a stiff breeze. Already the pirate galleys were beginning to drop astern. Those pirates who had gained a foothold on the ship were falling back to the bulwarks, hard pressed by the crew. Certain death faced them if they remained on board, and the majority preferred to take a chance in the sea. One by one they mounted the bulwarks, jumped, and vanished. Some were picked up by the galleys, others were not.

Hawkins strode aft, whistling between his teeth. "Good work, bo'sun! You been helping, Nicky?" He turned and shouted down to the lower decks. "Man the port guns! Let them have something to remember us by!"

And clear the decks—throw those carcases into the sea. There's one up here even."

"He's not dead——" began Nicky. But no one took any notice. Dead or living, every pirate who remained on the vessel was lifted, head and feet, swung, and sent hurtling over the side. Meanwhile the ship quivered under the vibration of the guns. Fascinated, Nicky leant over and watched the jet of acrid yellow smoke, and then either the water-spout, indicating a miss, or the chaos of a direct hit—the boat splintering, the white-clad figures hurled right and left, and then nothing but dark round heads and flashing fins . . .

"Ay, they'll remember us," said Hawkins in a tone of deep satisfaction. "What's the matter, Nicky?"

"Nothing, sir."

"You look a bit green. Sight of the blood upset you?"

"N-no, sir. I got a knock on the head. I say, we've killed an awful lot of them, haven't we?"

"Yes, a tidy number."

"I—I s'pose it was *necessary*?"

"Yes. The harder we hammered them, the less likely they'd be to attack another ship. We've got to make the sea safe for trade. And, anyhow, it was their lives or ours."

"Ye-es. Would they have murdered the lot of us?"

"Worse. They'd have made slaves of us—galley-slaves. How'd you like that, Nicky—to be a slave, chained to the oar in one of those boats?"

It occurred to Nicky that there must have been slaves in those very galleys just sunk by the *Hector's* gun-fire—perhaps even white men, Christians, Englishmen, thrown into the water fettered, unable even to swim. It was not a pleasant thought.

Hawkins spoke again. "We'll run south a bit, then make the coast again. We'll need that water. That's the trouble with this coast—pirates. I had them in mind all day, and kept my eyes skinned for them. It's all right when there's a wind and a bit of a sea running—you can keep them at a distance. Calm's the danger. They can buzz round you like flies, and once it comes to close-quarters, they're as good as we are. Ugly things, those scimitars!"

Nicky agreed. Somehow, adventure in real life was turning out very different from adventure on the stage. In real life you couldn't sit back and enjoy the spectacle. If you were honest with yourself, you had to admit (in your heart of hearts, anyhow) that you spent most of the time in a mortal funk. The only difference between a hero and a coward was how much he hid the fact.

The *Hector's* company had suffered badly enough in the battle, though nothing to compare with the total slaughter they had inflicted on the enemy. Eighteen Englishmen, shrouded and weighted head and foot, were lowered into the sea to the solemn words of the burial service and the farewell salute of guns. Thirty or forty more had wounds of varying severity, and the surgeon was kept busy in his cockpit, bandaging, stitching, and amputating.

Fortunately, the next few days passed without further incident to harass the exhausted crew.

They ran down the coast of Africa with a favouring north wind, stopping only to run into a river-mouth for fresh water and vegetables. Gradually the coast-line changed. The long sand-banks and the vista of tawny desert, broken only by occasional clumps of palm-trees, gave place to a region of dense, swampy forest, with black,

muddy creeks running down to meet the Atlantic breakers. The sun grew stronger every day, and every day, at the same hour, the shadows were shorter on the deck.

"Guinea," said Timothy. "Those creeks are swarming with crocodiles. But there, *you* can see a crocodile any day. You're lucky," he added pathetically.

Nicky laughed. "When we get home," he promised, "you must come to our house. We've got big looking-glasses. If we stand two together, you'll be able to see your back."

"Nicky boy, you're a Christian! I shall look forward to that day."

They ran up one of the larger creeks to replenish their water-casks again. It was obviously a regular anchorage, for there was a Bristol vessel already there, and quite a big native settlement on the right bank. Hardly had the *Hector* moored than a boat put off from the other ship and rowed over to her.

"A social call," said Hawkins with a smile.

A minute later the boat came alongside. A little, yellow-faced man came running up the ladder like a monkey, and hopped down on the deck, sweeping off his plumed beaver as he did so.

"Captain Meredith, commanding the *Venturer*, of Bristol! Your servant, gentlemen!"

"My name is Hawkins. Very glad to meet you, sir."

"Hawkins!" The visitor stared. "A name mighty well known in the Guinea trade."

Hawkins bowed. "My uncle originated it. Will you take a glass of wine, Captain Meredith?"

"Thank you, sir, that's a very good ideal." (He had

the Bristolian habit, Nicky noted with a smile, of adding an "1" where it was not wanted. At a nod from Hawkins, Nicky followed them both to the state-room, and produced the decanters and glasses.)

"Your health, gentlemen—and good trading."

"And yours."

Captain Meredith set down his empty glass and peered shrewdly from under his sandy brows. "May I ask, Captain Hawkins, if you too are engaged in the American trade?"

"No, sir, I've put in here merely for water. I've no intention of competing with you."

The visitor looked relieved. He instantly became more genial, and accepted another glass. "Well, sir, the world should be a big enough place. We have no need to tread on each other's heels."

"Unless the heels are Portuguese, eh?" They both laughed heartily. "I'm for India, myself. I fancy there may be possibilities there."

"India? A mighty long voyage, that—and who knows what's at the end of it? I prefer a quick trip and a quick profit."

Hawkins smiled. "The East Indian profits are nothing to grumble at," he answered. "A hundred per cent., a hundred and fifty per cent.—sometimes even higher. And if we can get our foot on the mainland, it'll shorten the trip a good deal."

"If! Well, Captain Hawkins, I hope the Great Mogul won't eat you. I'll bid you good-day, now."

Hawkins bowed him to the ship's side. "Business is good, I trust?"

"Mustn't grumble! I've just arranged for a cargo at quite a low price. I'm promised delivery within three

days, so then I'll be off. Good-day, gentlemen." The little man disappeared over the side.

Nicky touched Hawkins' sleeve. "May I go ashore with the water-party, sir?"

"Yes, if you want to."

"Ought I—ought I to go armed?"

Hawkins stared, then chuckled. "Certainly! You'll need a pike, musket, brace of pistols, and a cutlass. It might be well to take a bow and arrows too." He clapped his hand on the boy's shoulder. "No, lad, there's no danger here. The natives depend on their trade with the English. Still, there's no harm in getting used to weapons. Tell the armourer to rig you out with a pistol and hanger. After all, one never knows . . ."

John Rose joined the boat-party, which was under the command of Timothy. Their landing caused little stir in the village, which was accustomed to the sight of Europeans. A few naked children gathered to stare, and one or two women brought forward baskets of fruit, which they offered in exchange for the coloured beads the sailors produced from their pockets.

"The water's brackish here, because of the tide," said Timothy. "We'll have to get one of them to show us where they drink from. Sure to be a stream or a spring nearby. Bring those casks along, and look lively."

"We're going to wander round the village," said John. "We'll meet you by the boat in about an hour."

"Ay, ay, sir."

The two boys strolled away by themselves. The village was a large one, almost a town. There seemed to be scores of huts, thatched with grass and palm-leaves, and ranged round a central market-place. Here squatted the crafts-

men, turning pottery on their primitive wheels, beating metal, and sharpening long thin spears.

"Nasty-looking weapons," said John.

Nicky agreed. "I wish I could speak the language," he said regretfully.

"What a waste of energy! Why bother? These niggers understand a kick from a sea-boot—and, if they don't, you can always explain with a broadside or two. What more do you want?"

"They're human beings like us——"

"Rot! They're savage heathens. They'd slit our throats for two pins. I wouldn't trust them a yard, any of them."

"You know, John, I've noticed a queer thing. Have you? There are scarcely any *men* about."

"You're right! The place seems full of women and kids. Perhaps the men are out hunting."

"It'd be a big hunt, though . . ."

"Oh well, why puzzle your head over it?"

"I don't know." Nicky's brow puckered. "Only—I don't quite like it. There's a sort of atmosphere about this place. People keep stopping and listening as if they're expecting something. They look anxious."

By this time they had wandered right through the village, and out of a gate which pierced the stockade on the inland side. The jungle did not stretch right to the village at this point. It had been cleared for a space of several hundred yards, and the intervening ground was planted with rows of corn and other crops. The fresh air was welcome after the heat and smell of the narrow lanes.

"Did you hear that?" asked John suddenly.

Nicky listened. "Yes. What is it?"

For a moment John did not answer. They both stood

silent and intent. From somewhere in the jungle came a deep, steady throbbing.

"Drums?" suggested the West Countryman. But the sound was like no drums that either of them had ever heard. This was no gay rat-tat, no muffled roll. It was a monotonous pounding, like the beat of a racing pulse. Its sole variation was in pace. It seemed—at all events—to quicken, as a pulse quickens with rising excitement.

Nicky shuddered. "I don't like it much. It—it sort of gets inside your head."

John nodded without speaking. He was staring towards the dark jungle, his face flushed, his lips parted. There was something terribly fascinating about the weird music. At last, with an obvious effort, he turned and spoke.

"They must be war-drums. I've heard of them. These tribes are always fighting. . . ."

"The people in the village seem to have heard," said Nicky. A wild hubbub had risen from behind them, although it was difficult to guess, from the high-pitched voices of the women and children, exactly what it was that was exciting them. And now fresh drums started, near at hand, within the village itself.

"I expect they're calling in the men," John said. "I should have thought it'd have been a good idea to shut this gate."

The original drums had ceased now, but those in the village were deafening. The hot air seemed to quiver with the vibration.

"Well, er—" Nicky moistened his lips. "What about getting back to the boat?"

For once, John was inclined to agree with him. There was something unearthly in those drums. He felt he

would be happier on the solid deck of the *Hector*, with a stretch of water between him and these savages. But, even as they turned to go, Nicky grabbed his arm. "Look!" he said hoarsely.

A long column of men was emerging from the dark green shadows of the forest. There must be hundreds of them. The line stretched far back, out of sight—there seemed no end to it. The men in front were near enough for the boys to see their high feathered head-dresses and loin-cloths of leopard-skin. They brandished spears ferociously and yelled as they marched, but by far the most alarming thing about them was the white daubing of their faces and bodies, so that at a distance they resembled grinning skeletons.

"Come on," said John. "We've got to warn Timothy."

They turned and ran back the way they had come. The whole village was in a state of pandemonium, with women and children dashing in every direction, screaming at the top of their voices, but there seemed not the slightest attempt to prepare any defence, or even to escape to the jungle on the other side.

"Thank goodness, there they are!" panted Nicky. The party was just ahead of them, trundling the water-barrels towards the boat, which was now not a hundred yards distant.

"Bo'sun!" John shouted. "You'd best look lively and get those into the boat, or leave them. There's a whole army of savages marching on the village—there's not a moment to lose!"

"That's all right, sir." Timothy turned leisurely, shifting the plug of tobacco in his cheek.

"You'd better hurry!" urged Nicky. He was fingering the pistol in his belt.

"Careful with that, sir!" Timothy exclaimed, looking nervous for the first time. "The only time those things *never* misfire is when you don't mean 'em to go off at all."

"Let's get a move on," interrupted the other boy. "They'll be here before we know where we are."

The bo'sun grinned slowly. "No cause for alarm, sir. It's only the men of the village coming home."

The boys stared at him, stupefied. "But—those drums! And all the howling and yowling!"

"That's just a welcome home, as you might say. Look, here's Captain Meredith coming ashore. *He* knows what it means. They're bringing his cargo, and he wants to look it over before he takes delivery."

"His cargo?" inquired Nicky uncertainly.

"Black ivory!"

"Slaves," explained John, who had recovered his self-possession. "For export to the Spanish colonies in America, you know. I say, let's go and have a look."

Reassured by the sight of the dapper little Captain Meredith strutting in front of them, Nicky agreed to return to the market-place, where by this time the whole population seemed to have assembled. The warriors were marching in to the throb of drums, driving in their midst, like cattle, a miscellaneous crowd of men, women, and children. Many of the prisoners were bleeding from wounds. All looked cowed and miserable, except the mere babies in arms who had no idea of what was happening.

"There must be hundreds," said Nicky. "Surely they'll never get them all in the *Venturer*?"

"Heavens, yes! Anyhow, a lot die on the way over, so there's more room for the latter part of the trip. And

the traders are very clever at packing them. Like herrings in a barrel!"

"I—I suppose these are prisoners of war?" It sounded rather silly, Nicky thought to himself, asking if these babies and tiny children were "prisoners of war."

"In a way, yes," John agreed. "Only, of course, there *wasn't* a war until Captain Meredith came along. Then I expect he gave the chief of this village an order for so many slaves within so many days, and the chief went off and attacked another tribe to collect them. It's the best way," he added by way of explanation, "when there's a big order to deliver. Sometimes captains buy condemned criminals, and sometimes they invite a lot of negroes on board and make them drunk, and sail off with them before they know where they are. But for a rush order on a large scale, there's nothing to beat a war."

"You seem to know a lot about it."

"Yes, the Captain's yarned to me. It was his uncle, Sir John, you know, who started the trade."

Nicky remembered Hawkins' words to him. "*How'd you like to be a slave, Nicky?*" He took one more look at the dejected captives, and began to move away.

"It seems a pretty poor sort of trade to me," he said disgustedly.

"Poor?" John exclaimed incredulously. "Why, the profits are magnificent—even when half the cargo dies on the voyage."

"I meant it was a dirty business—un-Christian."

"I say, you *are* goody-goody!" John looked annoyed. "And you'd better shut up, if that's what you think. Just remember this—Sir John Hawkins did so well with black ivory that Queen Bess went shares with him in the business."

"The Queen? I don't believe it. She wouldn't do anything so—"

"I can tell you the very name of the ship," retorted his companion triumphantly. "And it was a Christian enough name, too—the *Jesus*!"

CHAPTER VII

INDIA AT LAST!

"I HAVE begun to wonder whether such a place as India even *exists*. It seems hard to believe. We have been two years on the way. So many accidents and delays, and so many turnings-aside whenever there was a whisper of possible profit! I have often feared that Captain Hawkins had forgotten, or lost interest in, his scheme of penetrating the mainland. But it still remains at the back of his mind, and no one can shift it. There was a disagreement at Socotra, where we sailed after doubling the Cape of Good Hope, and we parted from the other captains, Keeling and David Middleton. I think they fancied the Red Sea trade, but would probably end by going to the Spice Islands . . ."

Nicky laid down his quill and sighed. It was so hot in the state-room. His moist fist stuck to the page of his journal. That journal! He had kept it, off and on, ever since leaving England. The first entries were already turning brown. The dates changed gradually: 1607, 1608, 1609. . . . The book was already nearly full.

He sanded the wet writing, blew away the sand, and slipped the little calf-bound volume into a drawer.

Two years! He stood up and stretched himself. He was seventeen now. He had grown, and filled out a little, though the heat had kept him on the thin side. His body, bare to the belt, was tanned a reddish-brown, and there were muscles swelling under the skin which had been almost non-existent in the earlier days of the trip.

He heard Hawkins' firm tread approaching, the swish of his full-cut breeches, the clink of his sword. The doorway filled with the broad shoulders of the Captain.

"Well, Nicky boy, you can be brushing up your Turki!"

"You mean—we're getting near, sir?"

"We're in sight of land. Didn't you hear the look-out?"

"No, sir. I was busy writing."

"You can write any day. Your first sight of India's a different matter altogether."

India . . . at last.

Nicky raced to the forecastle and peered from the bows, under the white arch of sail, at the long brown smudge lining the eastern horizon. It looked exactly like any other land, but, after so many months of travel, he was no longer the green schoolboy, expecting to find elephants and serpents and piles of gems arranged ready for him on the beach. It took time to get to know a strange country and explore its wonders.

"Shoals ahead!" sang the look-out in his monotonous chant. Soon Nicky himself could see the long white line of breakers, far out in front of the land, indicating a sandbank just beneath the surface. The *Hector* was swinging round to starboard, edging her way cautiously southwards in quest of a gap in the barrier.

"That's a mighty long shoal," observed Timothy. "But yon's the end of it. Six or seven miles of it, I shouldn't wonder."

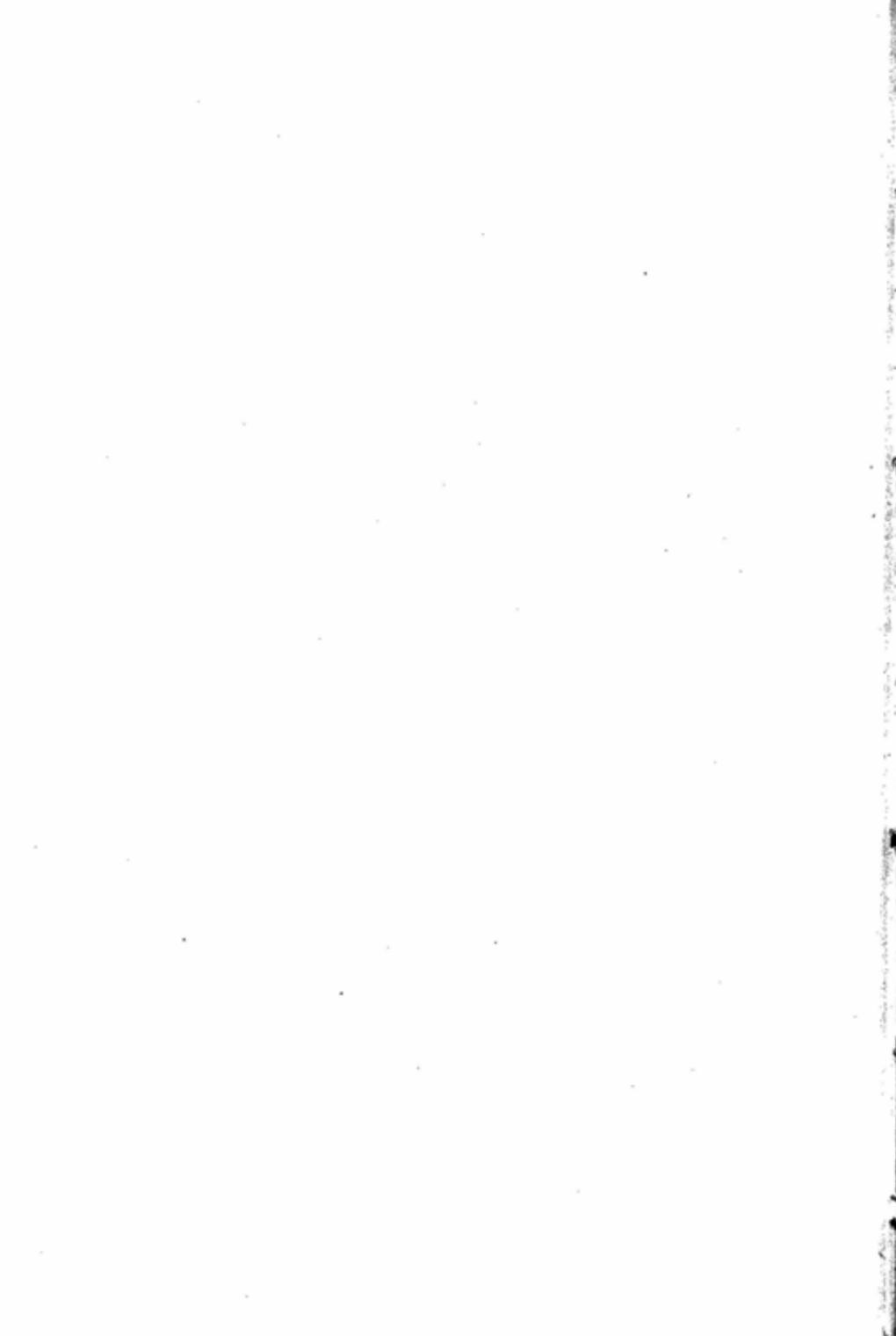
"Don't you feel excited, bo'sun?"

"Excited? What call have I to be excited?"

"Well, aren't we the first to reach India in an English ship?"



INDIA . . . AT LAST.



"I wish we weren't, midear! This looks a tricky anchorage. I could wish more fools had gone in front of us, to show us the way of it. As for being the first," he continued mournfully, "someone *has* to be, so it's no cause for sinful pride. And we're not the first ship, because the Portuguese have been sailing here for a hundred years and more, and we're not even the first Englishmen, because I'm told that others have come before us, by land, and altogether——"

"Oh, shut up, Timothy, you'd take the gilt off a whole fair-full of gingerbread!"

"Well, my old dad taught me to leave no statement unquestioned."

The *Hector* had now rounded the end of the shoals and entered the calm water beyond. Nicky could see a white and yellow town, not unlike some of the Arab ports they had already visited. Three large vessels, and a number of small craft, were already moored in the roadstead, or in the mouth of the river which entered it at this point.

"Portuguese," said the bo'sun. "And *won't* they be pleased to see us?"

Nicky grinned. There was something deliciously impudent about the way in which the *Hector* was coolly sailing into a harbour for a whole century the closed preserve of Portugal. He felt his skin tingle with a new excitement. He looked from the galleons to the fort on shore, and fancied dark-skinned gunners, Portuguese and Indian, squinting longingly down the polished barrels. But they daren't fire, yet! There was peace—officially. They must be courteous. Even pretend to welcome the interloping Englishmen!

The *Hector* hove to, the anchors rattled down into the pale green water.

"I'll want you, Nicky," called Hawkins.

"Very good, sir."

"And smarten yourself up as much as you can." Hawkins smiled, softening his criticism. "I know all our wardrobes are getting somewhat limited. But we've got to impress these people."

"I'll see what I can find, sir."

"Splendid. Oh, and bring your inkhorn and pen. And one of those blank letters of introduction from King James. We can find out the Governor's name when we land, and fill in the blank before we deliver the letter."

"Very good, sir."

It was an immaculate party which landed an hour later. Steel and leather were polished till they flashed. Draggled plumes had been smoothed, coats brushed, beards combed, until Hawkins and his officers looked more as if they had stepped straight from court than from a two years' voyage in the tropics.

Their landing had been eagerly awaited. A big crowd of natives had gathered, kept back by a party of turbaned swordsmen. An officer greeted Hawkins in broken Portuguese.

"I want to see the Governor."

"His Excellency awaits you, gentlemen, if you will please follow to his palace."

"His Excellency's name?"

"Mocrob Khan, Sir Hawkins."

"(Remember that Nicky—slip it into the letter when you get the chance.) And, I suppose, His Excellency holds this town under the Great Mogul?"

"Yes, sir." The officer made a gesture of reverence. "The mighty Jehan Gir, son of the ever-blessed Akbar. Will you please follow me, gentlemen?"

"Best to get these little questions cleared up early," murmured Hawkins as they walked through the sun-scorched town. "Very awkward to sing the praises of one potentate, and find he's been dead a couple of years, or the man you're talking to is in revolt against him!"

"Does that happen much in India?" Nicky inquired.

"Not like some of these other places. Akbar was a strong man. I believe this Jehan Gir has had a little trouble, but I think he can keep order well enough."

"Order!" John Rose sniffed contemptuously. "They're a lot of bloodthirsty heathen. I've heard how this Great Mogul impales people on spikes. Call that keeping order!"

Hawkins laughed easily. "If an Indian had sailed to England in our grand-dads' time, he might have had something to say! Edward, Mary, Elizabeth—rest her soul in peace!—not to mention Lady Jane. Ay, we had our fill of rulers and false rulers, and family quarrels and executions."

"That was different, sir."

"Well, we mustn't let them hear us wrangling. Here we are at the palace, by the look of it."

They were ushered into an inner courtyard, cool with fountains and shady trees. Round it ran a colonnade, like a cloister, with white pillars and pointed arches, and brightly coloured tiles underfoot. Slaves brought a jug of some strange liquid, which they handed round in jewelled cups.

"It's cold, anyway," said John grudgingly, having tasted it. "That's about all you can say for it."

"You should know better now than to expect wine from a Moslem. Hullo, who's this?"

A tall figure was striding down the colonnade towards them. The bars of sunshine which slanted between the pillars glinted on a white face and white feet. As the man approached they saw that he was a priest. His hands were hidden in the dark folds of his habit, and a crucifix dangled at his waist.

"Good-day, gentlemen. You speak Portuguese?"

His teeth flashed in a pleasant smile. He was a striking personality, thought Nicky, with his commanding height and his magnificent black beard. His voice was mellow. Hawkins greeted him rather curtly.

"My name is Father Bartolomeo. If I can be of any assistance to you in your business with the Governor—"

"Thank you, Father Bartolomeo. But it would be hardly fair to make use of you. We have come here to trade."

"I see. I imagined so."

"You can't be expected to welcome a competitor. As a Portuguese—"

"Oh, please!" The priest smiled and spread his hands. "I am a missionary, not a merchant. We priests are not concerned with nationality. Only with the Faith."

"Your faith is not ours."

"Alas, no! But we both have many beliefs in common. Such as loving our neighbour, and doing unto others as we would have them do unto us. I must insist on helping you in any way I can."

Listening, Nicky thought it was like two wary fencers feeling gradually for advantage.

"You are too kind, Father Bartolomeo. Since you insist, I shall be glad to avail myself of your kind offer. I will tell you at once—should the occasion arise."

"There is no time like the present. The Governor will

be receiving you in a few minutes. He understands very little Portuguese, and naturally no English. I shall be delighted to interpret for you."

"But we——" Hawkins began and stopped suddenly.

"It is no trouble, I assure you," continued the priest smoothly. "I enjoy the confidence of His Excellency and always advise him in commercial matters with Europeans. I should be present at the interview in any case. And now, if you will come this way, I will introduce you to His Excellency myself."

They found Mocrob Khan enthroned under a canopy in an immense hall of audience.

He was himself immense. Nicky, standing at a respectful distance, got an impression of bloated cheeks and innumerable chins, only partially concealed by a scanty beard. It seemed wrong, somehow, that from that pudgy face should jut the sharp, hooked nose of the Afghan. Mocrob Khan had run to seed. Only that aquiline nose, and the keen black eyes under the puffy lids, reminded one that he came of a line of conquering mountaineers who had softened under the easy conditions of cities and plains.

He sat there motionless, like a rock, or—as John Rose rudely murmured to Nicky—like a cow staring over a gate. Only his eyes flickered, and, at rare intervals, he made a slight gesture with his plump hands . . . just enough to set his rings flashing in the cool grey light of the hall.

The preliminary courtesies took some time. Presents were exchanged, the letter from King James scrutinized (upside down), and left to flutter to the floor. Father Bartolomeo translated a flowery address of welcome into sonorous Portuguese. Mocrob Khan yawned loudly.

Hawkins replied more briefly, asking the priest to insert such compliments as he thought fit, and contented himself mainly with a statement of the business which had brought him to Surat. Father Bartolomeo duly turned it into fluent Turki.

The Governor stopped yawning. He began to betray signs first of interest, then of excitement, and finally of annoyance. His hand fell once to the hilt of his scimitar. He wheezed a question. The priest continued in low, urgent tones.

Suddenly Hawkins' blunt voice, ringing strangely in ungrammatical Turki, cut across the interpretation and brought every eye upon him.

"That, Your Excellency, is false. I said no such thing."

There was instant commotion. The Governor sat forward, opening his eyes a trifle wider. Father Bartolomeo turned and stared down from his higher position on the dais. There was a forward movement on the part of the Indians, and the little band of Englishmen instinctively gathered closer, fingering their rapiers.

"So you speak Turki?" The Governor's voice was husky.

"Sufficient to understand a lie when I hear it."

"Senhor Hawkins!" For an instant the priest's face reddened with anger. Then, with a visible effort, he regained his calm. "There seems to be some misunderstanding, Your Excellency——"

"Misunderstanding!" echoed Hawkins. "I know this, Your Excellency: he has just informed you that I came here demanding the sole right of trade at Surat. Whereas the truth is that I wish to trade, certainly, but on the same terms as the Portuguese. As for the other things he

hints at, and professes to warn you against, they are utterly untrue. The English have no wish to take a yard of your territories."

"And what do *you* say, Father Bartolomeo?" The keen black eyes swivelled to the priest's face.

"If I have misunderstood, and mistranslated, I am truly sorry, Your Excellency. As you know, I have only your interests at heart."

"But not ours," rapped Hawkins.

The priest shrugged his shoulders. "I did my best, Senhor, but I confess it was sometimes difficult to follow your Portuguese. No doubt that was how the mistake arose. Had you told me that you were so competent to conduct your own business in Turki, I should not have offered my services—and exposed myself to insult."

Hawkins flung his head back, and, for a moment, it looked as though he would let out one of his hearty, Devonian guffaws. But, fortunately, he restrained himself, merely chuckled, and said: "I don't imagine for a moment you would." Then resuming his former seriousness, he addressed Mocrob Khan.

"I have stated my purpose in coming here, Your Excellency—to trade peacefully, without let or hindrance, and in turn without interfering with anyone else. What is your answer?"

It seemed like an age before the Governor's flabby lips moved. Nicky waited anxiously. He had understood most of the conversation, and every word spoken by Hawkins himself. He knew that this was a crucial moment. On the answer to this question depended the fate of the whole voyage. Either they would open up a new market, perhaps the richest in the whole world . . . or they

would have to follow the other ships meekly to the Spice Islands, and become the laughing-stock of all.

Mocrob Khan shifted in his seat, and glanced uneasily at the priest. There was silence in the hall, except for the soft rustle of great fans, stirring the air around the throne.

"All our sea-borne trade," he said slowly, "is controlled by the Portuguese."

"That is no reason why it should always continue to be so. We English can pay as high a price for your goods, and we have fine cargoes of our own to exchange with you. In my own ship—"

"I have no authority to trade with any but the Portuguese." The Governor paused while Father Bartolomeo murmured something inaudible to the others. "I cannot disobey the orders of my emperor."

"Certainly not, Your Excellency. But could not the Great Mogul be persuaded? Would you be kind enough to lay my proposal before him?"

Again that brief hesitation, that exchange of glances between the Indian and the Portuguese. . . . Then: "If you can convince me that you are merchants of standing, with resources behind you—"

("That means more expensive presents," grunted Hawkins in his beard.)

"—I shall be glad to forward your proposal to His Majesty."

"And how long would that take, Your Excellency?"

"Who knows? If the court is at Agra, the journey takes only a few weeks—"

"Weeks!"

"But His Majesty travels a good deal, and it might take much longer for the messenger to find him. Also, you

will appreciate, he has a thousand and one matters of State which must be dispatched before he can find time for minor business."

"Minor business?" Hawkins raised his eyebrows. "Can we be definite, Your Excellency? Just how soon could you guarantee me an answer—a plain 'yes' or 'no'?"

Mocrob Khan yawned cavernously. "Possibly in three months. More likely in six. Only Allah knows."

Hawkins turned to his companions, and burst into English. "Six months! Or even three! It's impossible. We can't stay here, cooling our heels, all that time."

"Better give up the idea, Will," urged one of the older men.

"Hanged if I do!"

"You can see the Portuguese are in control here, pulling all the strings. You can't expect them to let us break in on their monopoly. All this is a mere waste of time. Let's give it up as a bad job, and go on to the Islands. There'll be plenty of good cargoes to be picked up there."

But Hawkins did not like to be beaten. "I'm sure this Great Mogul of theirs would see reason, if only I could put the proposal before him. I'll tell you what: I'll go up-country and talk to him myself!"

"You're joking, Will? It's thousands of miles!"

"I'm serious enough."

"You'd be murdered—"

"I'll take my chance of that."

"And what about the ship? If we're not allowed to trade, we can't lie idle here for months and months."

"You needn't. I shall send the *Hector* on to Bantam, and you can pick up the usual cargo in the Indies. This

is my personal affair, if you like. It's a chance in a lifetime, and I'm not going to miss it."

The others gathered round, expostulating.

"But you don't mean it, sir? You surely wouldn't go into the interior alone?"

"Ay, certainly I'll go alone. Unless any of you gentlemen fancies the notion of going with me."

There was an awkward silence. No one spoke. Then, as Hawkins turned on his heel to address the Governor again, Nicky gulped and said:

"I'll come if you'll let me!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE ROAD TO AGRA

ONLY the faintest of nods indicated that Hawkins had heard and approved.

He began to speak Turki again. "I have discussed the question with my companions, Your Excellency, and come to a decision. I shall go up and see the Great Mogul myself."

Mocrob Khan smiled coldly. "You speak confidently, Englishman. The Great Mogul does not lend his ear to every stranger from the other side of the world."

"He will lend his ear readily enough, Your Excellency, when he has inspected my credentials."

"Your credentials?"

"I have a letter to the Great Mogul from King James of England."

"Show it me."

"Your master would hardly approve of that. The correspondence of one sovereign to another is not to be fingered by underlings. Nor," added Hawkins swiftly, seeing the danger-light in the other's eyes, "would your master be pleased if harm befell me while carrying so important a message."

That shot went home. The Governor's eyes dropped. At last he said sullenly: "No harm will befall you, at least while you are in the territory under my jurisdiction. On the contrary, you shall have every assistance on the journey."

"Your Excellency is too kind."

"Allah go with you."

Mocrob Khan rose ponderously to indicate that the audience was at an end. He waddled away, supported by slaves, and disappeared through a curtained doorway. Father Bartolomeo stepped down from the dais with outstretched hand.

"I am sure I apologize, Senhor Hawkins. I assure you—"

"That's all right, Padre." Hawkins eyed him amusedly. "Portugal has her hands full, eh?"

The priest shrugged his shoulders. "The imperial responsibilities of my country are certainly heavy. But nothing compared with the spiritual."

"H'm. How's the war with the Dutch? Bothered you a bit, haven't they?"

"Surely you have heard, Senhor Hawkins?" Father Bartolomeo smiled incredulously.

"Heard? Heard what?"

"That peace has just been made between my own countrymen and the Dutch!" And before any of them could recover from their surprise, he had made his farewells and turned away. When the pitter-pat of his sandals had vanished into the depths of the palace, Hawkins found words.

"Well, I'll be hanged! That's a nasty jolt."

"Peace with the Dutch, sir? That means—"

"It means," said the captain grimly, as they walked back through the courtyard, "that their hands will be free to deal with us. And it means that if we don't get a finger in the Indian pie *now*, heaven knows when we'll get another chance. We've got to act quickly, before Portugal builds up her strength again. It's a nuisance,"

he added irritably. "I'd hoped the Dutch would keep her busy for another year or two yet. Still, we'll beat the lot of 'em."

"It's lucky," said Nicky, "that you've got that letter to the Great Mogul."

Again Hawkins flung back his head, and this time his laughter rang out unchecked, startling the pigeons from the palace roof. "That impressed them, didn't it? We must take care of that precious epistle, Nicky boy—because we haven't more than another dozen like it!"

Nicky stared, admiration mingled with misgiving. It seemed a desperate gamble to venture into the heart of this unknown country, staking everything on a mere standard letter—no more than a passport, really—requesting in general terms that they should receive protection and assistance. But the die was cast.

The next few days were spent in busy preparation. There were matters for discussion with the officers left in command of the voyage, advice and instructions as to their procedure after leaving Surat. There were letters to write, business letters to Sir Thomas Smythe, Governor of the Company, and to other London merchants interested in the venture, not to mention personal letters to family and friends—in case of accidents. It was impossible to foresee any way in which the two adventurers could be sure of rejoining the ship, either at Surat or any other port. "We'll take our chance," said Hawkins. "There'll be plenty of other ships, I hope—especially if we succeed. And there's always the possibility of coming home by land, via Constantinople."

Meanwhile, there was the journey to Agra to be planned.

Father Bartolomeo offered his help, without any sign of ill-feeling, and Hawkins, for all his distrust of the priest,

was compelled to make use of him. Without the man's influence they might have waited months for the horses, guides, permits, and other essentials for the trip.

"I suppose there's a road?" Nicky inquired dubiously.

"Bless your life, yes!" Hawkins chuckled. "You're as bad as John Rose with your notions of the benighted heathen. I expect the road to Agra's as well-trodden as the road to London."

"How far is it, sir?"

"Some say six hundred miles, some say seven. But we'll not lose our way—and we'll not miss Agra when we get there! They say it's a marvellous place. I talked to Sir John Mildenhall a few years ago—he went there by land, as the Queen's ambassador." Hawkins unfolded a piece of paper on which was a rough sketch-map. "See this? I've made it, just from what I've heard. Not reliable, of course—no more than any man's tongue is—but it's better than nothing."

"We've got guides, though, haven't we?"

"Ay, we've got guides." Hawkins laid his head on one side and looked at him quizzically. "But I've no liking for sailing any sea without a chart, and land's no safer. There may be rocks ahead."

"Not only rocks but mountains, by the look of it!"

Hawkins nodded and leant forward, tracing the route with his forefinger. "First we've to cross the Tapti River, and climb the Satura Mountains on the other side. Then we drop down to the valley of the Narbada, and beyond that we'll find another range, the Vindhya. Once over them, it should be easier. They say we'll come to a great plain, with only low foothills, and the rivers smaller. And yonder's Agra, this side of the Jumna."

"General direction north-east, sir?"

"That's about it."

At last all the arrangements were completed. The little cavalcade was drawn up in front of the palace—riding horses for the Englishmen and their escort of half a dozen soldiers, together with pack-horses to carry presents for the emperor and equipment for the journey. Hawkins would have preferred to travel much lighter, and therefore much faster, but it was out of the question. Travellers must carry their own bedding, cooking-pots, and other necessaries. Also, their importance would be judged by the size of their party. It would never do for a couple of Englishmen to arrive almost alone at the court of the Great Mogul.

They were rowed ashore at dawn. The farewells were said. Some people, like John Rose, were cheerful about it. Others could not disguise their gloomy expectations, and said good-bye as if they did not expect to meet the adventurers again—at least in this world. Only Timothy, confirmed old sea-dog as he was, seemed to envy them their trip into the interior. "I'll have lots of questions to ask ye," he warned Nicky.

The boat put off again. The guns thundered a last salute across the water—whether in honour of their late captain or of the Moslem governor, it was not perhaps wise to inquire. Her white sails flashing in the first rays of the morning sun, the *Hector* glided southwards across the bay, cleared the shoals, and stood out into the open sea.

"And now we are really alone," said Hawkins softly.

Nicky nodded in silence. It was impossible not to feel a deep pang at the sight of the vessel, now dwindling to a bright speck upon the blue. It was not only that, for a couple of years or more, it had been home to them. They were now friendless and almost helpless, dependent

entirely on their own wits, in a strange, vast land, where the only people who even knew of their existence were most likely to be their bitterest enemies.

Hawkins shrugged his shoulders, as if to shake from them the weight of care.

"Come on, Nicky. We'll just say how-d'ye-do to Father Bartolomeo, and be off."

"He has been quite helpful, after all, hasn't he?"

"Yes. Hanged if I can make that man out! I don't doubt there *are* good Portuguese, and, for that matter, good Papists. But whether the reverend father is one of them or not, I can't make up my mind."

Captain Hawkins soon found himself a step nearer to making up his mind. On inquiring for Father Bartolomeo, he was told first that the priest was not yet awake, secondly that he was ill, and finally—after a good deal of pressure—that he had gone away.

"Where?"

After more pressure, and a small bribe, he got the answer he had feared and expected. "Agra."

"When?"

"Last night—after you returned to your ship."

Hawkins turned to Nicky with a sardonic expression. "You understood that? Not content with making arrangements for our journey, the reverend father has gone rushing ahead of us—to make arrangements for our reception!"

"I—I suppose it may be all right. I mean, he was so helpful . . . He may be acting in good faith."

"Good faith! Why didn't he tell us he was going? Why didn't he travel with us? Don't be a fool, Nicky. Oh, well, there's no use in crying over spilt milk. We can't bring him back, and I doubt if we can catch up with

him. We must wait till we reach Agra. I've still got a trick or two up my sleeve."

With that, he stuck his foot into the stirrup and swung himself into the high native saddle. Nicky followed suit, though with a little less skill, being unused to any saddle, Indian or English, and with a musical jingle of harness the cavalcade set out.

This was their first real view of India, and, jogging along as they did, at a pace to suit the unmounted servants, they had plenty of leisure to study the country unfolding on either side.

Surat itself had not been so very different from the other Eastern ports, Arab and Persian, at which they had touched in the past year. But the country beyond was in complete contrast. Here was no red, sun-bitten desert, undulating in dunes and broken only by a clump of palms. The broad Tapti flowed through a valley of green luxuriance, and, far above the tree-tops, the mountains rose until their heads were often buried in the slowly drifting clouds.

They crossed the river in broad-bottomed ferry-boats—it was unwise to let even the horses swim, for fear of crocodiles. From that point they began to climb, striking up aslant the mountain-range which shut them off from the next valley.

"I've seen mountains as high as these in the north of Wales," said Hawkins, "but they're as bald as a baby. All grim grey slate. But these—they make my own Devon seem like a desert! Wooded to the top!"

And such woods . . .

They flamed with colour—not the cool greens that Hawkins remembered from the woods beside his native River Tavy, or that Nicky had seen in Epping Forest or

on Highgate Hill, but the hot crimson blossoms of the wild cotton-tree, the whites and scarlets and yellows of a dozen trailing creepers or flowering shrubs, of which they never learnt the names.

There were wild fruits in abundance. Often, when they halted, one of the servants would bring them a selection, heaped upon a freshly plucked leaf. After the long months at sea, it was a great temptation, and they yielded to it, until they began to be racked with pains.

"The devils!" Hawkins groaned. "I believe they've poisoned us!"

"I—I don't think so." Nicky clapped a hand to his stomach. "I can remember feeling like this once before. It was green apples, then."

"I hope you're right."

Nicky was. The symptoms disappeared gradually, though it was several days before either of the adventurers was completely recovered. Thereafter, they were more careful, eating only a little fruit, and drinking no water unless it had been boiled or came straight from the purest spring.

They met plenty of other travellers on the road.

There was a long caravan, carrying spices to the Portuguese vessels at Surat. There were Arab and Persian traders with their merchandise. There was a Portuguese officer, yellow with fever, screaming frenziedly through the parted curtains of his litter. There were returning pilgrims, beggars, jugglers, sword-swallowers, and holy men with rapt faces and strangely deformed bodies.

Even so, there were whole hours when no one passed. At such times the soldiers kept a warier eye upon the forest hemming in the road, and shifted their spears into a position readier for action.

"What are you afraid of?" Hawkins asked. "Bandits?"

"No, sahib. The law is well kept along the road. But the tigers don't know about it!"

"I see." Hawkins could not help looking to the priming of his pistol, though he always, as a matter of principle, kept it ready for use.

"There are lions, too, but they don't attack men so often as the tigers."

"Any other dangerous beasts?"

"The black bears are dangerous if you disturb them—and they always strike at the face. But they live on ants and fruit and honey." The soldier considered for a moment. "Of all animals I think the worst is the wild dog."

"The wild dog?" echoed Nicky in surprise.

"Yes, sahib. If you are alone in the jungle you may escape all the others, but if the wild dogs get on your scent . . ." He paused expressively. "They hunt in packs of about thirty. They are tireless. They can outrun the deer—wear him down until he drops with exhaustion. So there is not much chance for a man!"

Nicky made a mental note not to get lost in the jungle.

Fortunately, each night was spent in a village, where he could stretch his stiff legs in safety, wandering round the cluster of mud huts and the terraced fields with their crops of millet and vegetables.

India seemed all villages—they had seen no town since Surat—and all the villages seemed the same: a few hundred acres of ground cleared in the midst of the jungle, and an apparently infinite number of men, women, and tiny children energetically engaged in tilling it. The huts all looked the same, there was usually a great spreading

banyan tree in the middle, its shade serving as a common meeting-place, and every village had its water-tank, lovely with huge water-lilies. Huts were provided for travellers and in these, each night, the bedding was unrolled and supper served. The villagers were courteous and helpful, although—since it was the main road between Agra and the sea—strangers, and even white strangers, were hardly an unusual sight. The headman always called to welcome them, and, if there was any difficulty about the route, such as finding fords or bridges, he either accompanied them himself or sent someone else.

It was at one of these bridges that the first incident of the journey occurred.

It was a swinging bridge of ropes and bamboo, the headman explained, thrown across a deep cleft above a mountain torrent. Horses would not cross it, and had to be taken to a ford, five miles lower down, but there was no need for the Englishmen to make that detour. Let the horses be sent ahead at dawn, while the Englishmen crossed the foot-bridge at their leisure, and rejoined the main party for the noonday rest. As, however, the bridge was in need of repair, he would himself accompany them and see them safely across.

"Good idea," said Hawkins. "No sense in jogging five miles down the mountain, if we've only to come up again. The walk'll make a pleasant change."

They set out, accompanied by the headman, and Ali, the commander of their little escort, with two of the soldiers.

It was a beautiful spot, with vivid white waters thundering down between red cliffs and green jungle. The air throbbed with the roar of the torrent. It was cold and damp with spray.

Hawkins looked at the bridge, a long, slender affair, rocking gently above the biggest whirlpool of all. One of the hand-ropes had rotted away. A number of the bamboo slats were missing from the footway. "More like the rungs of a ladder than anything," he commented.

The old headman smiled apologetically.

"It is quite safe, sahib. I myself will lead you across. I will come back for the young man."

"Oh, no, that's not necessary—"

But the headman was determined to fulfil all the duties demanded of a host. He spoke more and more volubly, until he became quite unintelligible to the Englishmen. Then, suddenly, at a few sharp words from Ali, he stopped. His face took on a puzzled, hurt expression, and, after stammering the conventional remarks of leave-taking, he turned and disappeared in the direction of his home.

"He was an old fool," explained Ali. "I shut him up, and sent him back. We shall manage better without him."

He gave an order to one of the soldiers. The man stepped boldly on to the bridge and crossed almost at a run.

"You see, it's quite safe. Will you cross next, sahib? The bridge will bear the weight of two," he added.

Hawkins glanced at Nicky. "Coming?"

"Of course! It can't be half as bad as rigging in a storm."

Nicky grasped the hand-rope which remained, and started to walk across. Hawkins followed close at his heels—but not too close, for he had to watch for the gaps in front of his feet.

The waterfall spumed and thundered below them, all

snowy froth and dark, bottle-green. The bridge swayed ever so slightly under their weight. The spray rose in a constant misty cloud, so that the wood was greasy with damp.

"Don't slip!" shouted Hawkins unnecessarily. Nicky did not intend to.

The soldier who had crossed first was squatting on the opposite side with the silent patience which (as they had already discovered) was one of the commonest characteristics of the Indians. As Nicky drew near the end of the crossing he had to slow down—the bridge curved upwards at a steep gradient, and the bamboo-slats were few and far between. He was near enough to see the soldier's features clearly. They had lost their impassive expression. The eyes were dilated whitely in the swarthy face. They were fixed on someone or something behind Nicky—something at the far end of the bridge.

"What's the matter?" the boy yelled.

Perhaps the man did not hear his voice above the booming of the river. At all events he did not answer.

Nicky dared not look round—only by fixing his eyes firmly in front of him had he managed the crossing thus far—but he knew, as surely as if he had seen it, that there was danger behind. Instinct made him shout again, this time in English :

"Come on, sir! *Get off the bridge!*"

He covered those last few yards with the shambling haste of a bear trying to climb a greasy pole. He could feel his companion's breath hot on his neck. He saw the green cliff-edge, the soldier now on his feet, but apparently paralyzed.

The bridge swayed under him, canted a little to the left, the side on which there was no hand-rope.

He heard Hawkins bellow: "Jump!" He knew that until he was clear his companion had no chance.

He jumped wildly, clutching, at grass, digging his nails into the spray-soaked earth.

And then, clear above the rushing waters, like a pistol-shot, came the snap of a rope. Through the corner of his eye he saw the foot-bridge dangling vertically from its sole remaining support.

CHAPTER IX

JOURNEY'S END

Of Hawkins there was no sign.

Horror-stricken, Nicky swung himself round, still clutching at tufts of grass, and craned forward to look. The waterfall was hurling tons of white water every minute into the seething pool below. No swimmer could live in such a maelstrom.

"Give me a hand, Nick!"

His heart bumped at the familiar voice. Hawkins was crawling up the cliff-edge, still half hidden by the over-hanging bush into which he had thrown himself. Nicky put out a ready hand and hauled him to safety.

Ali and the remaining soldier on the opposite bank were shouting and gesticulating, but their voices were completely inaudible against the roar of the river.

"They'll have to go round by the ford," panted Hawkins. "It's lucky we've this fellow to show us the way to the horses."

It was several hours later when two footsore soldiers caught up with the main body. "We saw the bridge breaking," Ali explained. "We tried to warn you, but of course you could not hear."

"That would be why the other man was getting so excited," said Nicky. "But why had you drawn your sword?"

Ali stared. "Oh, that, sahib? I'd heard a rustle in the bushes. I was afraid it might be a tiger."

"The man with you hadn't drawn his. Perhaps he wasn't afraid of tigers?"

"I suppose, sahib, he hadn't heard the rustle."

"You must be a very brave man, Ali. You think there is a tiger in the bushes—and you don't trouble to mention it!"

"I do not understand," said Ali blankly, shrugging his shoulders, but it was obvious that he understood very well. As they rode on, Nicky said to Hawkins:

"Do you remember that play, sir? When we met first?"

"Oh, yes, that piece of Shakespeare's. What about it?"

"Something reminded me of it. There was a scene where the king and the councillor wake up and find their companions with swords drawn. They ask why. 'Oh, we thought we heard a lion,' say the men. But really—"

"They'd been planning to murder the king!"

"Yes, sir."

"I wonder. . . . They seemed mighty anxious to get rid of the old headman. . . . Yes, Nicky, I think we'd better go warily."

The youth knitted his brows. "There's only one thing I can't understand: if they want to kill us, why don't they just do it? They outnumber us three to one, not counting all the servants."

"They daren't, unless they can make it look like a pure accident. They'd be answerable to the Great Mogul. And I fancy he won't want us killed until we've told him what we have to offer."

"Well, the next bridge we come to, I'm going to cross immediately behind Ali!"

"We'd better be careful over food, too—especially these

wild berries they're so fond of offering us. They might try to mix in some poisonous kind."

"I shall always offer some to Ali, and see what *he* eats."

"Of course we may be quite mistaken. That break in the rope may have been natural and genuine. But discretion is better than dying."

There were no more suspicious occurrences, however.

The Narbada River was duly crossed, and the Vindhya Mountains scaled. From the passes of this range they could see a vast plain spreading northwards, its level surface broken only by an occasional ridge of low hills. They descended to this plain in a series of dizzy zig-zags, but, thanks to their sure-footed horses, there was no mishap.

And now the broad highway rolled before them towards the fabled capital of the Great Mogul. . . .

They had been struck by the luxuriance of the mountain woods, but it was nothing compared with the apparent fertility of the plain.

Villages were far more numerous here. The land teemed with people. The tracts of jungle were smaller, and often the fields of one settlement ran right up to the fields of the next.

Their road lay between spreading fields of millet, rice (in the swamplier regions), wheat, and vegetables of all kinds. Sometimes it was cut through dense plantations of bamboo. At others it was shaded by tall, swaying coconut palms, or the stumpier date trees. A circular clump of palms usually indicated the presence of a village.

"It's a rich country," Hawkins said. "I hear they often get two harvests in one season."

"They seem to work hard enough."

Ali explained that every peasant had to pay one-third of his produce in taxation to the emperor. The late emperor, Akbar, had made a great land-survey for this purpose, and not even the loneliest hamlet had been forgotten.

Nicky thought of the thousands of toiling peasants he had already seen with his own eyes. Then he thought of the millions who must exist in other parts of the Mogul's Empire. Small wonder that the Mogul was fabulously rich!

Equally remarkable was the vastness of the country.

They had been travelling now for a month, and still their destination lay a hundred miles ahead. Yet the road from Agra to the coast crossed only a small part of India. Ali spoke vaguely of deserts to the north-west, of hot, rainy tablelands to the south, and of mountains—highest in the world, and fit homes for the old heathen gods—rearing their snowy backs somewhere north of the plains they were crossing. What man, even an emperor, could see the whole of such a country in one lifetime?

That month of journeying was by no means wasted.

Talking with Ali and his men, they were able to increase considerably their knowledge of Turki, while, from contact with the villagers each day, they picked up a useful vocabulary of Hindustani words and phrases. They were able also to piece out their previous information with fresh inquiries, and get a rough idea of recent history and the present position in India.

The power of the Moguls was new enough, as Empires go. It had been set up barely ninety years before. A race of Moslem conquerors from the northern mountains had long ago invaded the fertile plains and at last, after untold ages of warfare, had set up its emperor over most of the country.

"There are two main varieties of heathen here," Hawkins explained, "the Moslems and the Hindus. They used to fight cat-and-dog, for all the world as if they were Christian Protestants and Papists in old England! But Akbar had the sense to leave the Hindus alone, so long as they paid their taxes all right, and since then there's been peace. His son's following in his father's footsteps—not over-zealous about his own religion even, let alone interfering with other people's."

"And where do the Portuguese come in?"

"Oh, they started trading with India almost before the Moguls were firmly on the throne. Da Gama brought the first ship to Calicut—that's more than a hundred years ago—and a fine seaman he must have been, whatever else he was. The Portuguese made friends with the Moguls, supplied them with guns, and that sort of thing. Bit by bit they've so laid their claws on the foreign trade of the country that not even a Persian galley can sail from India without their permit. They had a monopoly of the spice and pepper trade until a few years back."

"They raised the prices terribly, didn't they?"

"Yes, it was out of all reason. So we had a meeting in London and decided to take a hand in the trade ourselves. That was how the Company was founded. The Dutch had done the same, and the old queen told us we'd be fools to be left out."

It was a few days after this conversation, and nearly six weeks after their departure from Surat, that they sighted their destination. Travellers passing in the opposite direction had already assured them, much to their relief, that the Mogul was in residence, and not away on one of the long journeys of which he was so fond.

Perhaps it was genuine appreciation, perhaps it was

sheer delight at reaching the end of their long journey, but at any rate Nicky vowed he had never seen anything so beautiful as the city of Agra, rising from the sandy shore of the Jumna.

Its sandstone walls soared to a height of seventy feet. They bulged outwards in great curving bastions. Their circuit he could only guess at, but on the riverside they ran for half a mile, their grim line softened by pleasure balconies and terraces, all reflected, dark red and shimmering, in the jade green waters of the Jumna lapping the base of the wall.

Despite the high battlements it was possible, as they drew near, to distinguish some of the larger buildings within—the richly swelling domes and the slender, sky-piercing minarets of innumerable palaces and mosques. It was a city of kings and princes, said Ali with a shrug. What had they expected? A cluster of mud huts round a banyan tree?

The ramparts loomed before them, pierced by an archway which looked (at a distance) a mere mouse-hole but which (when they reached it) soared high above their heads. Armed guards lounged and squatted round the iron-studded gates—helmeted, cuirassed, armed with spears and scimitars and even bows. But the brass cannon, twinkling in the embrasures on either side of the entrance, showed that the Mogul had also modern armaments.

"Made in Portugal," Hawkins commented. "Well, there are as good cannon cast in the Sussex Weald as ever came out of Portugal. If the heathen want to slaughter one another, we can supply them."

They rode through the arch—it was almost a tunnel, so thick were the walls. When they emerged into the sunshine again, it was as though they had entered another

world. A world of noise and bustle, of crowding humanity and confining walls. . . . It was hard to get used to, after the space and silence of the great plain.

Ali led them without hesitation to one of the palaces where, he said, rooms were always kept for foreign visitors. They crossed a garden courtyard, not unlike that of Mocrob Khan, and passed through colonnades and corridors until, at the top of a marble staircase, they were ushered into a spacious bedchamber. The servants had followed on their heels, carrying the baggage, which they piled neatly. They then withdrew.

"All right so far," said Nicky. "We seem to be quite honoured guests."

"Or prisoners! Too many doors and gateways for my liking! However, we wanted to get here, so we mustn't complain." He strolled to the window, which took the form of a small balcony overlooking the courtyard through which they had come. He laughed. "You must pretend it's the quadrangle of an Oxford college, Nicky—then you won't feel so shut in." He began to sing softly under his breath:

*"Trip no further, pretty sweeting;
Journeys end in lovers meeting,
Every wise man's son doth know."*

"It's journey's end, at any rate," agreed Nicky with a smile.

"Yes. Come here." Nicky stepped obediently to the balcony and looked where Hawkins was pointing. He was just in time to see the tall figure of Father Bartolomeo disappear into a doorway. "I don't know about *lovers*," said Hawkins with a deep-throated chuckle.

CHAPTER X

" WHERE WALLS HAVE EARS . . . "

" 'ALLO! May I come in?"

Nicky swung round, surprised to hear English spoken, even though it were with a pronounced foreign accent.

An eager-eyed young man was standing in the doorway. Dress, speech, and manner immediately identified him as French. He entered with a slight bow.

"I saw you arrive. . . . My name is Gaston Lebrun. Of Normandy—and Paris."

"I'm Nicholas Fowler, from London. I'm with Captain Hawkins—he'll be back in a moment. Have you just arrived, too?"

"Oh, no, m'sieu, I live here."

"Live here? In Agra?"

"Except when His Majesty sends us to work at Lahore, or some other city. I am an artist in—what do you call it?—inlay work. There are many European artists and craftsmen here, mostly Portuguese, but also Italian and French. But never can I remember an Englishman!"

"We're not artists," Nicky confessed. "We're—" He hesitated. He was learning the need for the utmost discretion. He changed the subject. "How long have you been here, m'sieu?"

"Two years. I may stay for five—or perhaps for ever."

"I shouldn't want to do that."

"But India is the country for the artist!" Gaston's

bright eyes sparkled. He gesticulated with enthusiasm. "There is no king in Europe who can pay us as we are paid here. It does not matter what we do—architecture, fortification, engraving, carving of wood, mosaics . . . we are rewarded as though we were each of us Leonardo da Vinci himself!"

At that moment Hawkins returned. Lebrun was duly introduced. Then he said:

"But I did not come to waste your time, messieurs. I came to show you the palace gardens."

"Very good of you. You go along with him, Nicky."

"You also, m'sieu!"

"Thank you. Another time, perhaps. Not now."

The young Frenchman hesitated. Then, smiling and dropping his voice, he said: "Do not think me impolite, m'sieu. But—I believe it would be greatly to your advantage if you would make a little promenade with us in the gardens."

Hawkins took a step forward and gripped his arm. "Can't you speak plainly, young man?"

"But certainly, m'sieu! Only—we have a saying here, 'where walls have ears, the wise tongue speaks in a whisper.'"

Hawkins nodded slowly. "A good saying. All right, Monsieur Lebrun, we'll take this walk in the gardens. But if it leads to any nasty surprises——"

"But, m'sieu!"

"I'm just giving notice, that's all. Bring your pistol, Nicky."

Nicky needed no telling. True, he had taken an instinctive liking to the young Frenchman—in fact he was prepared to like almost anyone who could speak English, after so many weeks of struggling with Turki and Hin-

dustani—but he was also taking no chances. Although he had been inside the royal capital only an hour or two, its atmosphere of intrigue had already enveloped him. If Agra was a city of whispers and mysterious messages, it might also hold dangers.

Gaston led them through a maze of corridors. They passed half a dozen doorways, where sentries lounged, spear in hand. From somewhere in the distant recesses of the palace came the strains of music, monotonous and barbaric to their European ears.

They emerged finally into a garden, and the sunshine, after so much cool shadow, fell like a sword across their shoulders. But two years in the tropics had made them wise. They went nowhere in the heat of the day without their broad-brimmed hats.

It was a beautiful garden. Red and white roses climbed the enclosing walls, and there were vines with dangling clusters of purple berries. The paths were bordered with white marble, behind which dense rows of pansies bloomed, white, yellow, purple . . . cypress trees lifted their dark green cones of foliage against a dazzling background of cream walls and cloudless sky.

But Gaston took no interest in the flowers. Nor did he permit his companions to dally over them. Glancing left and right, to ensure that they were alone, he led them quickly through the gardens to the foot of a squat tower which jutted out from the walls.

"Now," said Hawkins, "what have you to say to us?"

"I, m'sieu? Nothing." Gaston looked surprised at the very idea. "But if you will wait here for a moment . . . then! There is nothing to suspect, I assure you."

"There had better not be." Hawkins chuckled grimly and eased his sword in its scabbard. He peered round

the garden. There was no sign of anyone. "We were to meet someone, I suppose?"

"But certainly, m'sieu."

"Whom?"

"That I am not at liberty to disclose, m'sieu. A thousand pardons!"

"Well, they're late, whoever they are."

At that moment there was a soft click, close at hand. Hawkins' ear, trained to danger-signals, caught the sound and he whipped round. A small, brass-studded door was opening—its very existence had been obscured by a pair of cypresses. He caught a glimpse of a spiral staircase ascending, and of a dark face cautiously peering.

"Quickly, messieurs," hissed Gaston. In a moment he had bundled them through the doorway. "I do not come with you. Au revoir!"

The door closed, plunging them into darkness. They heard a man stumbling up the stairs in front of them. A guttural voice besought them to take care. Nicky counted the steps, with some vague notion that the knowledge might prove useful. There were forty-seven. Then they stepped into a small room, lit only by a hanging lamp.

There was only one man in it, apart from their guide, who instantly returned to the staircase and vanished whence they had come.

The man who awaited them was magnificently clad and jewelled. His piercing eyes and hooked nose marked him as an Afghan, but in every other respect he was a complete contrast to Mocrob Khan. Here was no gross, human pudding, but an eagle rather—an eagle who was perhaps a little past the vigour of his youth, but as alert as ever. His beard was streaked with grey, and there

were deep wrinkles round his eyes, but the general impression was one of amazing strength and energy.

He did not rise from the cushions on which he was sitting, but he greeted them courteously in a dry voice.

"My name is Itmad ud Daulah . . ."

Hawkins started. He bowed slightly. "Then you are His Majesty's chief minister?"

"That is so." Itmad smiled. It was rather like a peep of rusty sunshine on a winter's day. "You may wonder that I, whose power is second only to the Mogul's own, have to arrange this meeting in so uncomfortable and secret a manner. But the very importance of my office is the reason. It would not do for us to meet officially—yet."

"I think I understand, Your Excellency. Such procedure is not unknown in English palaces!"

"Then we understand one another. So let us talk frankly. There are many rival parties at this court—many plots, intrigues, manœuvres. But apart from all petty and personal feuds there are two main divisions."

"Yes, Your Excellency?"

"There are the friends of the Portuguese. They are extremely powerful. And"—Itmad ud Daulah paused impressively—"there are those who are tired of the Portuguese."

"Am I to assume Your Excellency is of the latter persuasion?"

The minister shrugged his shoulders. He did not reply directly. "There are those," he continued, "who hate to see the power of the Great Mogul propped up by the infidel. But—the infidel is a power to be reckoned with. We depend upon his ships for our foreign trade. We need his guns. His Majesty is also fond of his artists

and musicians, and certain of his manufactures. But"—he paused again—"there is a proper place for everything. If the Portuguese would remain traders, it would be well. But they ask more. They have become puffed up with their own pride. Sometimes they talk as though they intended to rule the country!"

Hawkins made an exclamation of shocked sympathy, but said nothing. He could see where this talk was tending, but it was wiser to wait for a definite lead.

Itmad ud Daulah studied his long finger-nails. "It is not surprising therefore," he went on quietly, almost casually, "that some of our people are wondering if we could not exchange these Portuguese for someone more manageable."

"Such as the English?"

"Or the Dutch. It does not matter greatly. So long as we can preserve our trade, buy and sell what we want—and have no further interference."

"I can assure you," said Hawkins sincerely, "that this is the one desire of the English merchants I represent. We can buy from you and give you as favourable prices as the Portuguese. We can sell you better goods. Only give us the opportunity."

"I confess that I am attracted to the English. We have nothing to fear from you," said the minister candidly. "You are a small island people, not a great power like Spain and Portugal. We have heard—the Portuguese have boasted till we are deafened with it—of what they and their Spanish friends have done in the Americas. Yes," he smiled again, "the crash of those falling empires has been heard even in Agra. And we have no intention of allowing the Great Mogul to perish in the same way as the Incas. So, on the one hand, the small-

ness and weakness of England is a recommendation. On the other hand, we wish to assure ourselves——”

“Of what, Your Excellency?”

“That England is not *too* weak for our purpose. We ourselves have no great fighting ships. If we quarrelled with the Portuguese, our trade and our coasts would be at their mercy. . . . Only”—once more he studied his nails—“haven’t I heard that the English defeated the Spaniards in a great sea fight?”

“The Armada? Yes, certainly.”

“What has happened once can happen again.” Itmad looked up, his eyes blazing. “If I can convince His Majesty of that, I fancy that your mission here will be a prosperous one.”

“I am glad to hear it. Only . . .” Hawkins hesitated.

Nicky could guess what was passing through his mind. He was thinking that England had now a very different sovereign from the one under whose banner the Armada had been beaten. Elizabeth had been cautious enough in all conscience, but she would fight when driven to it. This Scotchman was another type entirely. Still, it would not do to discourage Itmad ud Daulah.

“Only this,” Hawkins resumed. “The English will fight only when their safety or their trade is at stake. They don’t send out conquering armadas for mere glory, or for a mere hope in the future. It will be necessary to allow some trade to develop first.”

“I see.” Itmad’s thin lip curled. “Only when you have warmed your hands with gold will you draw your swords. What do you propose?”

“That His Majesty should grant us trading rights at Surat—as a beginning.”

Itmad nodded.

"And it would be a great advantage if the Governor there could be replaced by someone . . . more of Your Excellency's way of thinking. Mocrob Khan is in the pocket of the Portuguese."

"I am well aware of that." Itmad sighed. "Well, it will be difficult, but we shall see what can be done. I will speak to His Majesty. I will see that others speak to him also. I am not without influence." He smiled. "You may be aware that the Empress, Noor Jehan, is my daughter. She will follow my instructions. Between us we will see that you are granted an audience with the Mogul as soon as possible, and that he is in a favourable mood to hear you. The rest"—he spread his hands expressively—"depends on yourselves."

He clapped loudly, and after a moment's delay the guardian of the staircase appeared. "There is no one in the gardens? Good. Let them return as they came." He turned to Hawkins. "I need not remind you—not a word of this conversation to anyone. May Allah shield you!"

It was dusk when they came out into the garden, and the southern stars glittered whitely above the tree-tops. They had some difficulty in finding their way back to their room, and in the end a friendly soldier escorted them.

"It's a queer way of doing business, isn't it?" Nicky commented. "You might think it was high treason, instead of trade."

Hawkins laughed. "There is sometimes a connection. Actually, it's all very encouraging. If we've such a powerful ally as the Mogul's chief minister—not to mention the Mogul's favourite wife—we ought to get that

trading concession at Surat. Meanwhile, for the present, we'll just have to be patient and see what happens. The next move lies with them."

Hawkins was mistaken.

The next move came from a totally unexpected quarter, and it was made with startling suddenness, just twenty-four hours later.

CHAPTER XI

THE ENEMY MOVES

It was evening.

Nicky was bathing—there was a tunnelled river-gate cut in the base of the outer sandstone wall, and the Jumna came lapping in through an iron grille which kept out crocodiles and other intruders. An oblong backwater was thus formed, with marble steps on the other three sides. It was a popular bathing-place with the young men.

Indians, he had discovered, were decidedly cleaner in their habits than the English. They bathed daily, apart from washing themselves continually throughout the day. Unfortunately, they considered it dirty to wash in the still water of a basin—the water must be running. When there was no fountain handy, they managed with a pitcher, pouring the water over themselves little by little, and rubbing as it trickled down them in streams. Nicky found this both awkward and messy, so he contented himself with a daily plunge into the bathing pool. The older Englishman stubbornly refused to change his former habits. Dirt, he insisted, was protection.

Thus it was that on the second evening of their stay in Agra, Nicky was standing alone on the steps of the pool when a figure accosted him from the twilight.

"Mr. Fowler? I was sent to fetch you."

Nicky stared. He could see that the man was short, plump, and plainly dressed, like a servant. "What is it?" he inquired.

The little man laid a warning finger on his lips. "Captain Hawkins asks you to come at once."

"I was just coming, anyway. Is he in his room?"

"No. He is with . . . a certain personage again. You understand?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You are required as a witness, and to make notes of the agreement."

Agreement! Nicky's spirits soared. It looked as if matters were moving with an un hoped-for speed. He pulled on his coat. "Where are they? Shall I go to—" Discretion made him hesitate. "To where we went before?" he concluded cautiously.

"No. It was considered wiser to change the meeting-place. If you will follow me . . ."

"Just a moment." Discretion again made Nicky pause. "How do I know that this is genuine?"

"You are wise to ask." The man laughed, though a shade impatiently. "We thought of that, and, to save delay, Captain Hawkins sent this. Have you seen it before?"

He held up a ring between finger and thumb. Even in the fading light, Nicky recognized it instantly as one of his friend's. His hesitation vanished, and he apologized for doubting the honesty of the man.

"Oh, no, you were right. You cannot be too careful in this place."

The man led the way quickly through the gardens. Despite his haste, he seemed even more anxious to escape observation. Sometimes, when they heard voices and footsteps, he pushed Nicky in front of him into the shadow of a tree until the people had strolled away. When, finally, they reached the shelter of the buildings, Nicky

could have sworn that no one had witnessed their passage.

His guide led him down a dim, lamp-lit corridor, and flung open a door. Nicky found himself in an ante-room. From behind an inner, closed door came the low murmur of voices. The sole occupant of the ante-room was a shrunken, sallow little man, who stood up from his desk with a stiff bow. For an alarming moment Nicky took him for a Portuguese.

"You do not speak Italian?" the man inquired in suave English. "Then let us speak your language. I assist His Excellency with his European business." He smiled. "We Italians are neutral, you see. Will you take some wine?"

"No, thanks, sir. They're wanting me in there."

"Not for a moment, please!" The secretary raised a slender hand in protest. "The discussion has reached a highly confidential stage. Even I have been ordered to withdraw. When they are ready, they will call us in."

Nicky sat down on a stool—the room was semi-European in its furniture. His guide had retired, shutting the door.

"Let me see." The secretary was playing with a quill pen. "I was unable to be present at the meeting yesterday, and His Excellency has not yet had time to give me the full details of what took place. I suppose the question of Surat was discussed?"

Nicky glanced doubtfully at the door from behind which the confused murmur of voices went on, uninterrupted. He wondered if Hawkins would approve of his saying anything . . . But to Itmad ud Daulah's foreign secretary . . . Surely there could be no harm?

"Ye-es," he answered.

"Of course, Mocrob Khan is a difficulty, isn't he? Were there any suggestions for dealing with him?"

"Well—"

Before Nicky could say more, the outer door swung open and a tall figure swept into the room. A mellow, musical voice began: "Oh, Don Enrico—" and stopped abruptly.

Nicky leapt to his feet. "Father Bartolomeo!"

"The young Englishman!" The priest turned to the other man. "You didn't tell me this," he said in rapid Portuguese. The little man answered sulkily in the same language.

"I thought it was better to keep you out of it. It's not your type of business."

Nicky jumped for the door, but the self-styled Italian was before him. The boy found his path barred, and a rapier-point twinkling under his nose. He stepped back, plucking his pistol from his belt, but the priest seized his arm in a powerful grasp and wrested the weapon from him.

"Let me go!"

For answer, Don Enrico raised his voice and called: "Pedro! Salomon!" The inner door opened promptly and two burly Portuguese emerged, grinning. The little man said sharply: "You can stop mumbling in my bedroom, the play is over. Guard that door. And now, Senhor Fowler, pray be seated. Let us discuss this matter calmly, like gentlemen."

"There's nothing to discuss."

"You are mistaken." The little man reseated himself behind his desk, and twirled the pen. His fingers looked cruel, thought Nicky. So did his beady eyes. His suave voice continued: "You have information which is of

value to us. We know a great deal already. We know with whom you and your master had an interview yesterday evening. We know where. We know the general basis of the discussion. It is just a few of the details we should like to know more about."

"I've nothing to say."

"No? We are prepared to pay for every word in gold. Think—gold. And no danger. No one will ever have the least inkling that you have been here, no one will ever suspect that the information was passed on by you."

"I'm not going to be bribed."

"Senhor Fowler, you are a very foolish young man. You came to India—as all we Europeans do—to make your fortune. I am offering you the easiest way of all, and you refuse! Think again. And, in case you hesitate because the reward does not seem worth while, let me add this: we are not merely prepared to buy your information now, but in the future also—whenever you have anything worth selling. Think of your opportunities as Captain Hawkins' secretary! We are offering you a certain income. For every word, gold!"

Nicky thrust his jaw out obstinately. "I happen to be his friend as well as his secretary."

"You are wasting your time, Don Enrico," put in Father Bartolomeo, in Portuguese. "Englishmen—especially young Englishmen—will not take open bribes. The offer should be wrapped up in words."

Don Enrico appeared nettled. "Leave this to me. I have no time to spend on coaxing, that is certain." He addressed Nicky once more. "I give you one more chance to tell us—willingly."

"I can't tell you anything."

"Very well. You realize"—Don Enrico stabbed the

air with his pen—"you realize that your coming here was not observed by anyone? That if we press you to stay here as our guest, until you find your tongue, no one will connect us with your disappearance?"

"You mean—you're going to keep me prisoner?"

"It would be unwise, wouldn't it, to permit you to walk out at this moment, in your present mood?"

Nicky said nothing. But his indignant face confirmed that it would be very unwise for Don Enrico to permit any such thing.

"So you will stay here until you decide to talk. There is a convenient apartment under my bedroom, next door. You may shout if you wish. The floor is thick, and you are unlikely to disturb my sleep. Pedro, open the trap-door!"

One of the men moved obediently into the further room. The other man seized Nicky, twisting his arms behind his back, and pushed him through the door. Don Enrico and the priest followed.

The pale lamplight revealed a small trap-door in the middle of the room. The rug which normally concealed its presence had been rolled back. The trap-door was open, but nothing could be seen. A damp, musty smell floated up through the aperture.

"You may find it a little cramped," Don Enrico apologized. "In fact, if you try to stand upright, you will bump your head. Notice that there are sunken bolts on the *upper* side of the door. I call your attention to them so that you may not waste your time or break your fingernails trying to push it open."

He nodded to the two men. They thrust Nicky roughly down through the hole. Immediately, his feet touched the floor below. His upturned face was almost level with the

rim of the trap-door. He preserved a sullen silence, not trusting himself to speak.

"I am sorry about the discomfort," said the little man, "but, as you know, you can put an end to it whenever you choose. We shall open the door at intervals to inquire. In the morning, we will consider the question of food and drink. You have nothing more to say for the present? Then good-night."

The square lid came slowly down, blotting out the light. Nicky bit his lip to repress a cry. It was horrible. He heard the bolts tapped into place, like nails into a coffin. He thrust upwards, but the thick timber was immovable. There was not a chink of light, nor could he hear a sound. It was like being buried alive.

There must be some other source of air—unless Don Enrico meant him to suffocate. Perhaps there was some ventilation shaft large enough to permit escape . . .

Crouching down, to avoid bumping his head on the low roof, he began to explore his cell. It seemed to be of irregular shape and, being unable to take normal paces, he could form only the roughest idea of its measurements. But it was something like fifteen feet by twenty, its height varying from five feet six to as little as four feet in one corner. It had not been built, evidently, but dug out of the sandstone foundations of the citadel.

He found a ventilation shaft in the loftiest corner, where, if he stood in one precise spot, he could be upright. This was made possible by a small, dome-shaped hole in the ceiling, which narrowed immediately, funnel-fashion, into a chimney no more than a few inches wide. He thrust his hand up as far as he could reach. It encountered no resistance. Clearly, the passage continued until, somewhere or other, it reached the open air. Equally clearly, it



THE OTHER MAN SEIZED NICKY.

was useless even to the slimmest prisoner as a means of escape.

There should, he felt sure, be another passage to ensure the circulation of air. The trap-door could not be counted as an opening. When bolted down, it was practically airtight. But a further search proved fruitless. If there was another opening, it was elusive. The sandstone walls were so scooped out into bays and shelves and holes that, in the dark, he could not be certain that one of these hollows did not conceal an air-passage.

In any case, he reflected, it would be far too small to be of any value. He might as well resign himself. There was no way out of the dungeon save through the trap-door, and that meant either tricking his captors or surrendering to them.

The most important thing was to keep control of himself. Otherwise, it would not be difficult to go mad in such surroundings. He must settle down as calmly as possible and await the next opening of the trap-door. Perhaps he would be able to think of some plan . . .

It was easier to say than to do! After half an hour in the pitch-black hole, so stuffy and yet so cold, he was dangerously near to panic. If Don Enrico had revisited him then, he would probably have agreed to anything—anything to escape from this tomb.

But Don Enrico did not come.

The slow hours passed. He was tormented by thirst. He had not eaten since midday. He lay down on the hard floor and tried to sleep, but it was impossible.

At last came the longed-for click of the bolts.

The trap was lifted. The daylight, pale as it was, dazzled him. He laid his hands on the edge of the floor above, and strove to lift himself, but his fingers were kicked

back. He caught a glimpse of a pistol-barrel. Don Enrico's suave voice floated down.

"I trust you had as good a night as could be expected. Are you ready to talk now?"

"If you'll let me out of here first," Nicky croaked through his parched lips.

"Oh, no, talk first, senhor."

"Then I'll see you hanged first!"

"You are stubborn. It would be better to give in now. I will tell you why. The longer you are absent from your friend, the more talk there will be. It may even reach the ears of the Great Mogul. In fact, if we are compelled to keep you here very much longer, it will be impossible for us to return you to your friend alive."

"Let me go now," Nicky offered, "and I'll say nothing to anyone."

"Certainly—if you will tell us what Itmad ud Daulah said to Hawkins."

"You can kill me first," retorted Nicky defiantly, though inwardly afraid.

"We may do more than kill you," was the pleasant rejoinder. Then he added in Portuguese: "We have some very efficacious methods of persuasion, haven't we, Father Bartolomeo? Arguments which, I am sure, will appeal to our young friend!"

To Nicky's surprise the priest's answer was curt. The wonted smoothness had gone out of his voice.

"I shall have no part in that, Don Enrico. I most strongly disapprove of such methods."

"But, reverend father, the Church sanctions torture——"

"Only in the service of the Holy Inquisition—to save immortal souls, but not to gain worldly ends. And only then in the last resort, with every safeguard and limitation.

It is laid down, for example, that a physician must be present to ensure, so far as is possible, that the heretic suffers no permanent injury."

Don Enrico laughed harshly. "Those are not my methods, reverend father. You must excuse the clumsiness of a mere layman. All the same, I fancy I shall persuade him to speak."

"Do what you like!" stormed Nicky. "It won't make any difference."

"I think," said Don Enrico, "we will let you cool for a little longer. Give him the water, Salomon . . . No, no food for the present. We shall open the trap-door again at noon."

For the second time the world was blotted out, and Nicky found himself in complete blackness.

He felt a little better after his drink, but weak with hunger, and nervously exhausted by so many hours of sheer helpless fury.

There was nothing to be done. When the trap was opened again, he might struggle like an animal to climb out, but they would merely push him back. It was too much even to hope for a quick, easy death in the struggle. They would have no need to use their weapons . . . and they wanted him alive.

Torture . . .

No, not that! He knew he wouldn't be able to stand that. Whatever brave resolutions he made, he'd break them when he saw the actual instruments of pain—the screws, the racks, the weights . . . Already, in imagination, he was suffering agonies. He let out a groan under his breath . . .

It was then he heard a faint whisper, as from another world: "M'sieu Fowlair, are you there?"

CHAPTER XII

COUNTER-MOVE

"GASTON! Where are you?"

There was no answer. For a few sickening moments he feared it had been a delusion, and that the voice had spoken only in his imagination. He called again, louder, a little hysterically: "Gaston!"

This time there was an answering whisper, low and muffled. It seemed to come from the far corner of the cell, where the rock ceiling bulged downwards. He stumbled over there, leaning forward and groping with his hands. There was no one there. His fingers encountered only the rough sandstone, grooved and hollowed by time.

"Gaston," he repeated desperately, "where *are* you? Am I going mad?"

The reply came quite distinctly, but from under his feet. "Have you found the ring?"

"What ring?"

"I am in the room below, m'sieu. There is a trap-door between us, but I cannot shift it from this side. Can you find it? It should make a hollow sound to your feet."

Nicky stamped round, but the floor seemed all too solid. He dropped to his knees and began to grope in the sand and grit. At last, to his joy, his fingers encountered cold metal.

"Gaston, I've found the ring!"

It was close to the wall, at the very lowest point of the ceiling—a spot where no one would tread.

"Excellent, my friend. Pull, then. I, for my part, will push."

The trap-door came up with unexpected ease, and Nicky bumped his head. Never had a bump mattered less. He blinked down joyously into the flickering torchlight, and saw the dirty, eager-eyed face of the young French artist.

"Will you so arrange it," Gaston requested, "that the trap-door closes exactly behind you, and the ring lies flat again? I do not wish it to be noticed how you made your departure."

"They'll search, they're sure to discover it."

"Perhaps not. Perhaps we can arrange that. And that is all the more reason for haste."

Nicky had no desire to linger. He slid down through the narrow opening, and pulled the door after him. It was good to stand upright again. His back ached as he stretched.

Gaston's torch revealed a narrow passage, curving away to the foot of a flight of stairs. The Frenchman gripped his arm sympathetically and urged him along.

"I am sorry, m'sieu, I did not think to bring food or drink, but it is not far."

"That's all right. I just want the daylight," said Nicky fervently. "How on earth did you find me?" he added.

"I observed your absence last night. Your friend is a suspicious man—he would tell me nothing. He thinks, I believe, that I am in league with your enemies."

They had mounted the stairs by now, but the passage still ran on, twisting and turning, and dividing into other passages, of which the torchlight gave only a fleeting glimpse.

"I guessed," continued Gaston, "that Don Enrico da Torres was responsible—he is like a spider, that man—at

the centre of everything! I guessed that he was keeping you somewhere in hiding. It is not difficult in Agra, you know. There are so many hundreds of rooms in the various palaces, so many foreigners all the time coming and going." He laughed. "A very villainous place, I fear, this Agra that is so good to artists!"

"It seems to be," grunted Nicky. "But I still don't see how you found me in the midst of such a rabbit-warren."

"No?" Gaston sounded a trifle embarrassed, a little reluctant to explain. "Perhaps we shall speak of that later. Just now, it is most necessary to get out of here."

A rabbit-warren, on gigantic scale, was a fair description of the complicated maze of rooms, passages, and staircases through which Gaston was hurrying him. Only once did they pause, while the Frenchman consulted a small jewelled watch.

"At what hour did they intend to visit you again?"

"Midday, they said."

"It is now almost ten o'clock. If they do not visit you before the time, I think we can arrange matters."

They hurried on. The torch was burning dangerously low. A rank, animal smell suddenly assailed their nostrils. A moment later a blood-chilling roar reverberated down the corridor.

"What's that?"

"The tigers, m'sieu. The emperor keeps them for sport, you understand. At feasts, he displays battles of tigers, or battles of tigers against elephants."

"Where are they?"

"Just in front of us," said Gaston cheerfully; "we shall pass them in a moment."

"I hope you're right."

The smell grew more pronounced, the noises more

alarming. They turned a corner suddenly, and were welcomed with such a snarl that even Gaston recoiled for an instant. Glaring at them through thick iron bars, framed in an arch of rock, was an immense Bengal tiger.

"If you bend down," said Gaston, "you can see a faint streak of daylight far away, yes? That is the tiger-pit. Not many people know that here, at the back of their caves, they have this other outlet. And always it is kept locked."

"What's the purpose of it?" Nicky was not sorry that his rescuer was now hurrying him on again. To inspect a tiger at close quarters, on an empty stomach, is not the most cheerful pastime.

"The purpose?" Gaston laughed softly. "Suppose that some day the Mogul wishes to make sure that no one will use the underground passages—or suppose there is already someone wandering in them, someone of whom he wishes to be rid? Tigers make good patrols. They can see in the dark, they can track men. . . . That is the time to unlock the gates. It is so designed, I believe, that each half swings back and cuts off access to the passages, either to the right or to the left. Thus there is no danger to the man who opens them—there are still bars between him and the tigers, and he can escape by one outlet or another. *If he knows them.*"

He paused abruptly, as if realizing that he had talked more than he had intended. He turned and gripped Nicky's arm again, very earnestly.

"You realize, my friend, that this is a secret? A secret that is not healthy to know?"

"It's been very healthy from my point of view," said Nicky with a hoarse laugh, "but I know what you mean, Lebrun. You can trust me."

"That is good."

They had turned off the main passage and were now climbing a curved flight of steps. At the top, a blank wall confronted them.

"One moment," whispered Gaston. "I must make sure the room is empty. It would not do if there was someone to see us."

He quenched the torch under his boot, waiting for a moment while the tang of the smoke faded in the air. Nicky heard a click. A thin streak of daylight pierced the darkness, but was immediately cut off by the application of Gaston's eye. The Frenchman appeared satisfied. He stepped back, closing the unseen shutter. There was the faint ticking of well-oiled machinery, and a part of the wall rolled aside, leaving a crescent-shaped aperture through which they could pass.

"There are other ways out," said Gaston breathlessly, "but this is the safest. The room is seldom used unless the palace is full of guests for a durbar."

They gained the corridor unobserved. Nicky realized that his own room was only a few doors away. Gaston pulled out his watch.

"I must go at once and—make arrangements. I shall come to your room immediately, then, and we shall have explanations."

Before Nicky could speak, he had hurried away. Realizing that there was nothing he could do, the young Englishman went to his own room.

Hawkins started up at his entry. The man's usually ruddy face was pale and haggard.

"Nicky! Where in heaven's name have you been?"

Nicky explained briefly, without giving any details of the method by which Gaston had rescued him.

"I've been frantic," Hawkins admitted. "I sent a message to Itmad ud Daulah . . . He sent back a polite expression of sympathy, but couldn't give me an interview. I began to wonder if *he* was responsible, but I couldn't see any earthly reason why he, of all people, should want to kidnap you."

"I expect," Nicky murmured, "he was just as worried as you were, in his own way, only he wouldn't dare to show it. He wouldn't want the details of that conversation to get to the Portuguese, would he?"

"No . . ." Hawkins knitted his brows. Then he said abruptly: "But you must be ravenous, my lad! Food's the next thing to worry about." He strode to the door and clapped his hands loudly. "That seems to be the way to get attention here." In a few moments a servant appeared, and in a very short space of time Nicky was devouring a huge meal of curried mutton and *chapatties*. Hawkins took the opportunity to dispatch a second message to the chief minister, informing him that Nicky had returned safely.

"And now," he said, resuming his seat and laying a pistol ready to hand, "if I see a white face come round that door, I shall let fly!"

"I shouldn't do that, sir." Nicky laughed through a mouthful of rice and highly peppered meat. "It'll probably be Gaston's—he's coming back!"

Sure enough, within twenty minutes there was a tap on the door, and Gaston entered, washed and immaculate. He waved his hands expressively. "All that has arranged itself, messieurs."

"Sit down," grunted Hawkins. "And thank you for all you've done—though, as to just what you *have* been doing, I'm still in the dark. What has arranged itself?"

Gaston sank gracefully on to a divan, and crossed his full-breeched legs. "M'sieu Fowler has not explained his escape?"

"No. I'm mystified."

"That is good. M'sieu Fowler was discreet, he respects my confidence. But it is all right. Captain Hawkins, I shall trust you also."

Hawkins stared. "Mighty condescending of you!" Then his glare turned to a grin. "Fire away, Frenchy!"

"Soon after I came to Agra," explained Gaston, "I stumbled quite by accident upon the secret of the underground passages. They were made—or perhaps they were extended—by the great Akbar, the father of the present Mogul. There was an old Frenchman here, from Normandy like myself, an engineer of fortification. He had supervised much of the work. He kept a plan of the passages—it was foolish and dangerous to do so, but he did it. I have seen that plan. It is destroyed now, but there is a copy—a copy where I can see it, and refresh my memory, a hundred times a day if I wish to"—he laughed exultantly—"but a copy which no other living man could recognize for what it is. Nor, if he did, could he possibly detect now that I made the copy myself."

"I thought this was an explanation," said Hawkins, "but it only deepens the darkness, so far as I'm concerned. Where is this copy?"

Gaston's eyes narrowed. "A thousand pardons, but that must remain my secret. But to resume . . . with the help of this useful knowledge, as M'sieu Fowler well knows, I was able to save him from an unpleasant situation."

"And believe me, Monsieur Lebrun, I'm just as grateful to you as he is himself."

"It is nothing. Enchanted to be of service!" Gaston's eyes were laughing again. "But it would have been a pity to let Don Enrico into my secret—he is bad, that man, and would have used the knowledge for his own ends. So, to prevent his searching the dungeon and discovering the true means of escape, it was necessary to entice him from his room, to disarrange his furniture, and to leave the trap-door unbolted. That is what I have been doing during the last hour." Again he flourished the jewelled watch on its slender golden chain. "At this very moment Don Enrico will be returning, to discover that the bird has flown. I should like to see his wizened little face!"

"That's marvellous," said Nicky enthusiastically. "He'll think someone rescued me from above. He won't trouble to search for any other way out."

The young artist became grave once more. "You are still in serious danger. Enrico da Torres is as dangerous as a python, and as cunning. You could not have a worse enemy in Agra. But . . . I imagine you have powerful allies."

Hawkins nodded. His face was lined with worry. Gaston fished in his pocket and brought out something which shone in the daylight filtering through the blinds.

"Your ring, m'sieu, I believe! Don Enrico borrowed it to assist in his deception."

"Well, I'm hanged!"

"The man has ears and hands everywhere. A man who can take a ring can also take a life."

There was a knock on the door. They all looked at each other. Hawkins' grip closed over his pistol-butt.

"Come in," he said coolly.

An Indian entered. He looked vaguely familiar. Nicky wondered if he was the man who had let them in and out of the tower on their visit to Itmad ud Daulah. He salaamed deeply.

"His Excellency rejoices to hear that the English guests are both in good health. He ordered me to give you this."

Hawkins picked up the folded paper and frowned at it. "What's this?" he began, but the messenger had already withdrawn. He tossed it impatiently to Nicky. "Make anything of it?"

"Looks like a bit of a love-poem," said the youth smiling. "Queer thing for old Itmad to send you!"

"Will you permit me?" Gaston inquired. They passed him the paper.

It bore only four lines of verse, a quatrain in the Persian style.

*"Take comfort, Stranger, think not I betray
Our great Desire. I cannot plainly say
What my Heart wishes. But no harm shall come—
My Shadows guard you, Night as well as Day."*

Gaston looked delighted. "As I thought, messieurs, you have powerful allies." He strolled to the door, and looked out into the corridor. He appeared well satisfied with what he saw. Then he crossed to the window, parted the blinds, and peered over the balcony.

Nicky followed him. There was nothing to be seen but a soldier, sitting on the steps of the fountain and polishing the long brass barrel of his musket.

"Well?" he demanded.

"One of your shadows," said Gaston, turning back

into the room. "Wherever you go, from now onwards, you will be watched by Itmad's own picked men. No one will enter this room without their knowledge. There will be no more little trickeries, no more mysterious disappearances!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE GREAT MOGUL

FOR a day or two after his underground experiences, Nicky was content to enjoy normal food and sleep, and the pleasant sensation of safety. After that, he began to share his friend's impatience.

When were they going to see the Great Mogul? When would something be definitely discussed and resolved?

There was no further word from Itmad ud Daulah. He seemed to have forgotten their existence. Only, as Gaston had foretold, his men kept watch . . .

It was done so skilfully that the ordinary person would have noticed nothing. But the men were there, sometimes openly in the uniform of palace guards, sometimes as servants or gardeners, sometimes—when the Englishmen strolled out into the streets or along the river-bank—as water-carriers, beggars, hawkers, or peasants.

There was no further move from the Portuguese. "Don Enrico knows the defences are up," Gaston explained. "He is no fool, that man. He does not waste his strength, throwing himself against steel."

The nobleman they never encountered, but Father Bartolomeo was quite often to be seen, striding down the corridors or through the gardens. Once he met Nicky face to face. Nicky glared, the priest half-smiled, as if amused, and passed on.

"He is not bad, that one—not *too* bad," said Gaston. "He is my confessor." He laughed at Nicky's expression

of horror. "Do not worry, I don't tell him everything—only my sins. It was not a sin to rescue you."

"He's certainly not so bad as the Don," Nicky admitted, "though he served us a dirty trick at Surat. Still, he was against torturing me."

"Oh, yes, he would not do that. You must forgive him. He is still a Portuguese, although he is a priest. And he wishes to convert India to the Catholic Faith, not let the English turn the people into Protestants. And, of course, I agree with him."

It was Nicky's turn to laugh. "I don't think you need worry about the English there. We've come to trade, not preach."

"But one thing leads to another. Still, I prefer the English, even though you are heretics, and so long as Don Enrico is their enemy, I am their friend."

Gaston could not speak of the nobleman without a tone and expression of the deepest loathing. Nicky never knew the origin of this hatred, but he guessed that it dated from some painful incident in which the artist and Don Enrico had come into conflict.

Days passed. The Englishmen led an isolated life, relieved only by Gaston's companionship. Their meals were brought to their room. They explored the citadel. In the cool of the early morning and the evening, they walked into the fields—much to the annoyance, in all probability, of their bodyguard. But some form of exercise was essential, and the only alternative was fencing, at which Gaston proved a worthy opponent. In spite of this strenuous pastime they began to feel unwell. Hawkins, especially, missed the sea air and the activity of life aboard ship.

Then, when they were beginning to give up hope,

came the long-awaited summons: the Great Mogul would graciously receive them in the Diwan-i-Khas on the following day.

It was all very exciting. Apart from the fact that they were about to see, and even converse with, an emperor ruling over hundreds of millions of people, there was the more practical consideration that the success or failure of their whole enterprise might rest on the way they handled these few precious minutes.

What had Itmad ud Daulah told them? "We will see that you are granted an audience . . . the rest depends on yourselves."

Once more, as at Surat, they overhauled their wardrobe, to ensure as smart an appearance as possible. They checked over again the numerous presents, with which a long line of servants would follow them to the steps of the throne.

The presents had been selected carefully, and with considerable knowledge of the Great Mogul's personal tastes. They included numerous pairs of gloves, embroidered caps, silk stockings for his ladies, mirrors, knives, striking clocks, and musical instruments. The Mogul's fondness for music was famous.

Also among the gifts (but to be delivered privately beforehand) was a generous supply of wines and spirits, the pick of the *Hector's* "cellar." To judge by all accounts these would be as welcome as the musical instruments, but in view of the Moslem disapproval of strong liquor, it would have been tactless and embarrassing to unpack the bottles in view of the court.

The fateful moment came. . . .

The Diwan-i-Khas was only the private hall of audience, not the great chamber used for more important

occasions, but it was impressive enough to Western eyes.

Jehan Gir sat on a carved throne, beneath sweeping arches of white marble, supported by slender, twelve-sided pillars. Nicky's eyes flew to those pillars—Gaston had told him proudly how he had assisted with the exquisite inlay-work which adorned them. Excited though he was, he could appreciate the richness of the work—an elaborate floral design, executed in precious stones—jasper, agate, jade, cornelian, lapis lazuli. . . . Nicky would never have recognized them, but Gaston, with an artist's enthusiasm, had rolled the lovely names off his tongue.

They halted at the foot of the steps and made a deep salaam. It went against the grain to humble themselves in Oriental fashion, but a mere bow which would have satisfied King James might have insulted the Great Mogul. “‘Paris is worth a Mass,’” Hawkins had quoted with a rueful chuckle, “‘and India’s worth a salaam!’”

They stood up, raising their eyes slowly and respectfully.

There stood Itmad ud Daulah on the right-hand side of the emperor. His keen eyes stared through them, as if he had never seen them before in his life.

And there, in the centre of all—the centre of the world, it sometimes seemed—the Great Mogul sat, leaning forward a little, his bloodshot eyes kindling with interest.

He was a youngish man, still, but his face was aged somewhat by the marks of self-indulgence. None the less, it was a strong face. Its features recalled those of the mighty Akbar, architect of the empire. The son was not unworthy of the father.

There was impulsiveness in the eyes and lips. Jehan Gir looked as if he could be cruel, but also kind and

generous. When he spoke, it was with a silky laziness.

"You have a letter for us from your king?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Hawkins stepped forward, the letter in his hand, but his path was instantly barred by an extended spear. The document passed through several hands before it was unfolded by the Mogul. There was a whispered consultation. Finally it was returned to Hawkins, and he was ordered to translate it into Turki. The Mogul listened in silence. Then he said:

"Your king asks us to give you protection. It is done. He asks us to assist you. What do you want?"

Hawkins explained. His desire might have been summed up in one phrase—a concession to trade at Surat—but he knew better than to put the matter so bluntly. It must be wrapped up in words. There must be flattery for the Great Mogul, considerable exaggeration of James I's power and magnificence, and a few very carefully veiled hints that the Portuguese were quite unworthy of the favours hitherto bestowed upon them. Jehan Gir listened to all this without flickering an eyelid. It was quite impossible to judge what he was thinking.

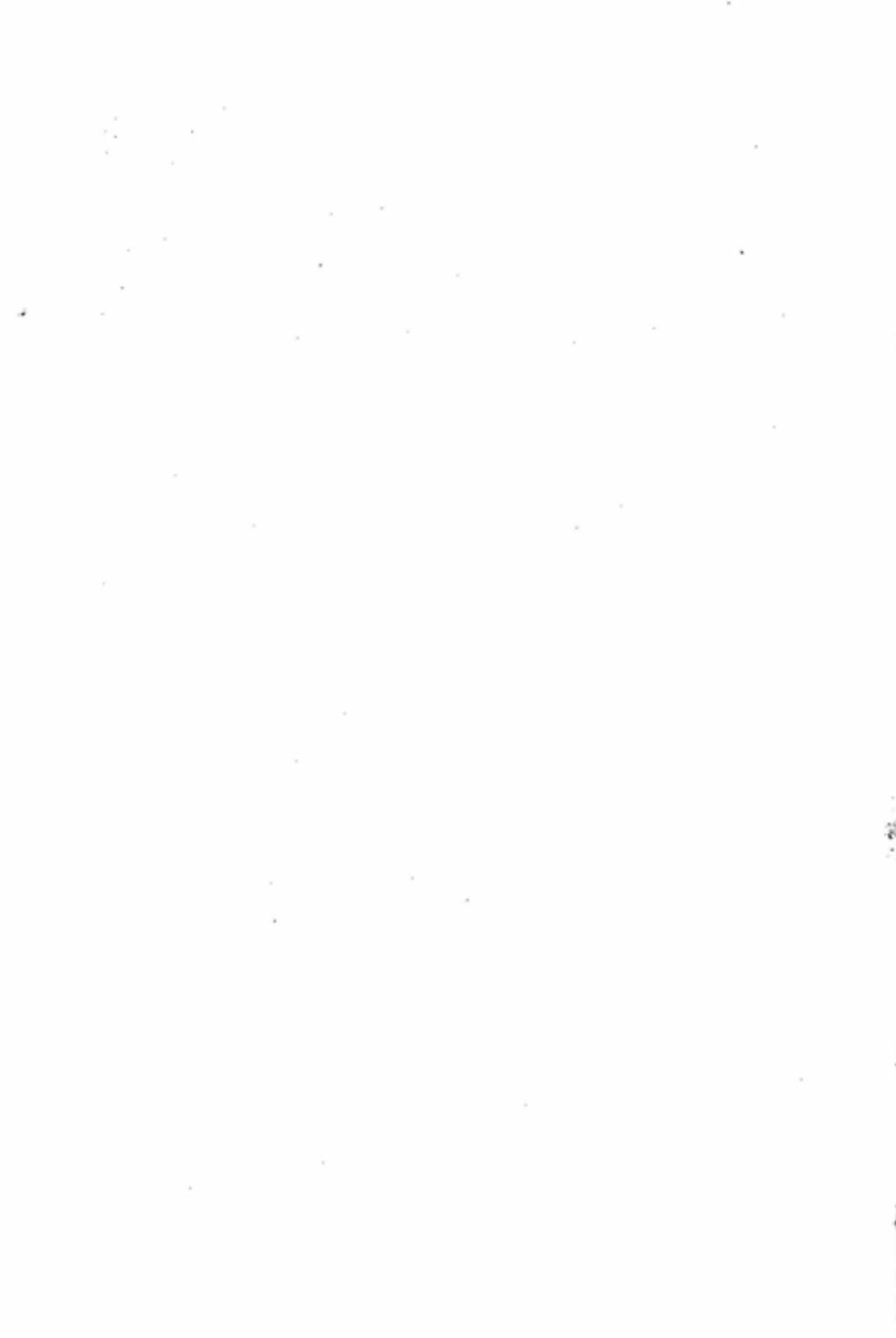
The servants came forward, one by one, and unpacked the presents. These were merely samples, Hawkins explained airily, of the goods which England could supply. Perhaps His Majesty would deign to examine them—even accept them, trifles though they were, and all unworthy to be gifts for an emperor?

His Majesty would.

In fact, the whole court became more animated at this stage of the proceedings than at any other. The clocks were held up and placed close to the imperial ear. When



HIS PATH WAS INSTANTLY BARRED.



one of them began its mellow chimes there was general delight. The silk stockings were dangled and their fine texture approved. When it came to the musical instruments, Jehan Gir demanded that Hawkins should play upon them.

The captain was taken aback. He had not handled such a thing since he was a youth, and his small knowledge of them had gone the way of his Latin and Greek. He looked appealingly at Nicky, who obediently took up a small harp, tuned it, and began to sing.

"Fortune, my foe, where art thou calling me? . . ."

Nicky's voice was nothing out of the ordinary, at least in an age when every educated young Englishman was expected to be able to sing as part of his social obligations. But it was a clear, tuneful voice, and apparently it pleased the Mogul. It was lucky that Nicky had a good repertoire, both of ballads and of songs from the playhouse, for it was not until after the fourth that Jehan Gir swept to his feet, signifying that the audience was at an end.

"It is good," he said. "Not so fine as the Italians, but very light and pleasant. We shall hear more upon another occasion. Captain Hawkins, you and the young man will attend us at our banquet tomorrow night. Let him keep the harp but bring it." With that he strode between the lines of salaaming courtiers and left the hall.

Back in their room, Gaston immediately appeared to congratulate them.

"There is no doubt," he cried, wringing their hands, "you have made a grand success! Your presents were approved and His Majesty was enchanted with Nicky's music."

"Well, I'm hanged," chuckled the captain. "Have

we come all the way from England to warble lyrics from the theatre? What are we—merchant venturers or musicians?" None the less, he was in good humour. The Mogul was a fish to be played before landing. It did not much matter what tackle was used—songs or silk stockings—so long as he was finally caught.

Their successful meeting with the Mogul had not gone unnoticed in other quarters. They passed Father Bartolomeo in the garden that evening, and his smile was more forced than usual, his bow stiffer. Hawkins stared after his retreating figure. "I'll swear the Portuguese haven't played their last card yet," he murmured. It was good to see that other figure flitting among the shadows behind them, watching. . . .

The next day, at noon, arrived a letter from Itmad ud Daulah. This time its meaning was not wrapped in verse. There was no longer such need for caution. Hawkins slapped his thigh and whooped like a schoolboy when he read it.

"Good news, sir?"

"Excellent! It's just arrived from Surat by courier, and Itmad's been good enough to pass it on."

Nicky sat up expectantly.

"News of the Company's sixth voyage, my lad! They've sent out Sir Henry Middleton—pompous ass, but never mind that—in a grand new vessel, *The Trade's Increase*. It'll be the vessel they talked of laying down before we left England. It was to be eleven hundred tons—think of it! Specially built for the trade. Finest ship afloat!"

"Where does the news come from?"

"The Red Sea, by Arab trader. That's where she was when last heard of. She may be at Surat by now. She

must come to Surat. Couldn't be anything better at this moment. Just when the Mogul is wavering towards the English, into his harbour sails the biggest ship on the seven seas—flying the English flag! That'll do the trick, my lad."

"What a pity we can't send a message to Sir Henry Middleton! Otherwise, he may hang about in the Red Sea for months. Or he may sail straight on to Bantam without touching India proper."

"Good idea, Nicky. We can't have that. I'll speak to the minister. There'll be ways and means of sending dispatches to the Red Sea—if the Portuguese don't intercept them."

They were still in a jubilant mood when the hour of the banquet arrived.

The glistening hall with its tinted marbles and inlaid gems, the hundreds of silver lamps, and the throng of guests resplendent in robes and jewels made the scene unforgettable. The banqueters must have numbered more than a hundred. Servants and guards, musicians and dancers swelled the crowd until even the spacious hall looked full.

"Fine plumage," whispered Hawkins, squeezing the young man's elbow. "They'd make King Jamie's court look like a lot of sparrows."

There were princes from every part of the Mogul's far-flung territories. There were distinguished visitors and ambassadors from beyond the frontiers—almond-eyed Chinese mandarins, dapper little Japanese tycoons hardly longer than their own swords, smooth-skinned vakeels from Java, Arab sheikhs, shaven-headed Tartar khans, Tibetan lamas, Persians, Turks, Manchus . . .

And Don Enrico da Torres . . .

Representing His Most Catholic Majesty the King of Spain and Portugal!

Nicky nudged his companion and pointed out the shrunken little figure, threading his way through the crowd, holding up the scabbard which otherwise might have tripped him.

"Gaston calls him the Spider——"

"And mighty appropriate, with a face like that, and in that dismal black and red rig-out! So *he's* the man we have to watch."

The Englishmen were allotted honoured places close to the Mogul himself. Hawkins smiled wryly as Don Enrico was led to the corresponding place on the Emperor's other side. Evidently Jehan Gir wished to appear quite equal in his favours. He was playing for safety.

Nicky could never afterwards remember the details of that feast. Other more important events were destined to wipe out the memory of mere sweets and savouries. Even before they happened he was feeling rather too awed by his surroundings to pay much attention to the dishes of delicacies that were pressed upon him. He ate mechanically—perhaps, in the long run, more than he would have eaten if he had been thinking about it—and in later days he retained a vague memory of rare, highly spiced meats and birds, luscious mangoes and figs, over-elaborate and somewhat sickly sweetmeats.

As soon as the eating was in full swing the entertainment began.

In a cleared space in the middle of the diners a snake-charmer set out his basketful of horrors. Acrobats, with bare greased bodies, performed such miracles of contortion that they appeared boneless. Musicians played on their high-pitched twangling instruments, or sang in strange

nasal fashion like the humming of insects. Nautch girls trooped in and danced their slow, swaying measures—they were almost the first women the Englishmen had seen inside the palace, for the ladies of the court were strictly secluded in the harem. A conjuror followed, and did unbelievable magic, making a tree grow from a pot before their very eyes—first a tiny six-inch plant, then a foot, two feet, three feet, taller every time the man flicked aside the cloth.

Meanwhile the wine-cups were filled and refilled till all but the most orthodox Moslems present had followed the example of Jehan Gir and thrown scruples to the wind. He sat in the midst of them, his keen eyes roving over the assembly, noting everyone and everything. Itmad ud Daulah squatted at his right hand. On his left stood a man to taste every dish and every wine-jar, lest poison should pass the emperor's lips.

At last came the moment which Nicky had expected and dreaded. The Mogul's wandering eye fell upon him. The silky voice quelled the general hubbub of conversation.

"Let us hear the young Englishman sing again."

Nicky started up, bowed clumsily, and licked his lips with nervousness. Then he caught the look of annoyance on Don Enrico's face. That steadied him. If the Portuguese disliked the prominence given to the English, then Nicky would give him as much to dislike as possible. It was one way of getting a little mild revenge.

He stepped carefully between the legs of the other banqueters, gained the open space in the centre, and turned to face the Great Mogul. A servant handed him the harp. He tuned it and began.

There was one consolation—Western music was so

entirely different from Eastern that neither the Mogul nor the vast majority of his guests could judge the quality of his performance. To them it was just a novelty, and they were satisfied.

He sang a song by Shakespeare, then one by Beaumont. He was quite at ease now. He no longer stared, with flushed cheeks and unseeing eyes, straight in front of him. His gaze roved round the company—Jehan Gir with his slight, gratified smile, Itmad ud Daulah cold and unmoved, the rajahs and nawabs, amirs and khans . . . Hawkins flashing a look of encouragement, Don Enrico sending a glance of hate before he turned and whispered to the servant behind him. . . . They were all listening to him, and some of them were numbered among the great ones of Asia. And the lesser guests, further from the emperor, had quietly crowded nearer, till the throng was pressing close at his back, silent and rapt.

It was then, as he drew near the end of the second song, that he saw Don Enrico's servant disappear, and reappear immediately behind Hawkins. Saw him bend, wine-jar in hand, over the Englishman's half-empty cup. Saw the ruby liquid flashing into the cup. Saw something else flash after it. . . .

Poison! His voice faltered. But before he could cry out he felt a sharp point pricking his ribs. Glancing down out of the corner of his eye, he saw that a tall native had edged his way until their two bodies were almost touching. The man's arms were crossed on his breast, the hands hidden in voluminous sleeves which hid something else besides.

Nicky knew, as certainly as if it had been told him in plain English, that at one word from him the dagger would be driven deep between his ribs.

He spent only a second or two in realizing all this. After that one break in his voice he continued singing mechanically, his eyes fixed on Hawkins and the fatal cup.

His friend had not yet drunk from it. There was still a chance, if only he could think of a means to warn him. . . . He sang on, heedless of the words he was singing, his brain racing feverishly.

He dared not finish the song. He knew what would most likely happen. There would be applause, then everyone would lift his cup and drink, Hawkins among them. It was the most natural action in the world.

Thank heaven, he had caught his friend's eye. He sent a glance of warning. Hawkins raised his eyebrows in puzzlement, glanced at his neighbours and behind him . . . but already Enrico's servant had disappeared. Mechanically, being ill at ease, Hawkins lifted the cup to his lips. Nicky started. Again came the significant prod of the sharp point through his clothing. Then, mercifully, someone spoke to Hawkins, and, in his eagerness to reply, the Englishman set down the cup untasted.

The question answered, Hawkins looked towards Nicky again. If only there were a way of telling him! If only eyes could transmit the one word: Poison!

Into his mind flashed the memory of a song in *The Tempest*—he had been so enchanted by that play, almost the last he had seen before leaving England, that he had been at pains to learn most of its lyrics by heart. He dared not end Beaumont's song because of that fatal interval for applause, but how should this audience, ignorant alike of words and of European music, know where one song ended and another began?

Boldly, without a moment's pause, he plunged into the other song. His eyes held Hawkins. He sang with his

whole heart, articulating each word distinctly, flinging it across the banqueting-hall to the one listener who would understand.

Ariel's song to the sleeping and threatened king!

*"While you here do snoring lie,
Open-eyed Conspiracy
His time doth take.
If of life you keep a care—"*

Nicky put in a line of his own to make the message plainer—

*"Do not drink, but do beware:
Awake! Awake!"*

Hawkins nodded. His eyes dropped to the goblet. He had understood. As the echoes of the song died, Hawkins burst into enthusiastic applause—so enthusiastic that his sleeve caught his cup and sent it crashing to the floor.

CHAPTER XIV

"FEAR NO MORE—"

THERE were a few moments of laughter and confusion. Nicky swung round, conscious that the dagger-point had been withdrawn from its unpleasant proximity, and that its holder had slipped away unobtrusively among the crowd. Relieved, he hurried back to his place and explained more fully to his friend.

Apart from that one grim reminder of the enemy, the banquet was a triumphant success for the Englishmen. They were summoned to the Mogul's side, complimented and questioned. Despite the immoderate amount of wine he had drunk, Jehan Gir remained remarkably shrewd. His keen eyes missed little. Though he made no reference to the spilt wine, the incident had not escaped his notice. When a hound sidled between the diners and made as though to lap up some of the liquor, he called out sharply, and it was dragged away. Under his breath he murmured something vaguely about "a present from Portugal," and smiled.

But the full measure of their social success was not known until the following day, when, rising late with headaches and disordered stomachs, they found themselves summoned to attend immediately upon Itmad ud Daulah.

He received them officially this time, in his capacity as Grand Vizier, but dismissed the rest of the company with a wave of his hand. His dark eyes were twinkling, and his wonted sternness was laid aside.

"I must congratulate you, Captain Hawkins. You have made an excellent impression on His Majesty."

Hawkins bowed his head silently.

"He is charmed. Charmed. In fact, everything points to a successful fulfilment of your mission here—which, as you are aware, will delight us all."

"I am very glad to hear it, Your Excellency."

"It was a particularly happy thought to bring Mr. Fowler. I do not myself understand your English music"—he smiled bleakly—"my ears are too old to attune themselves to what, by our standards, is only a discordant noise, but His Majesty was pleased. That is all that matters."

"You think, then, we have a good chance of getting the Surat concession?"

"Wait! You are in a great hurry. These matters take time. Meanwhile, you must make the most of your present advantage. You will see a great deal of His Majesty. You will have opportunities of persuading him in your own way. And, just as an indication of the favours which may come your way in the future, I have two pieces of good news for you."

"Indeed, Your Excellency? May I ask——?"

"His Majesty has been pleased to give you a court appointment, with salary—the salary will commence next month."

The Englishmen exchanged smiles of gratification. Then a thought struck Hawkins. "What are my duties?" he inquired dubiously. "What do I have to do?"

Itmad shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing. Talk to him when he wishes. Call it what you please—'adviser on English relations,' if you like. It is a mere matter of

form, you understand, to give you official status here, and to justify our paying you an allowance."

"It's very kind of His Majesty. I was only afraid I might have been appointed Keeper of the Royal Tigers, or Feeder of the Imperial Crocodiles!"

"No, nothing of that sort." The Grand Vizier did not show any amusement. "Better rooms will be assigned to you, and servants, for the duration of your stay. Mr. Fowler can either accompany you, or retain his present lodging."

"Shall we stick together, Nicky?"

"I'd prefer it, if you're willing, sir."

"There is also," interposed Itmad ud Daulah, "the question of your wife, Captain Hawkins."

"My wife?" echoed the Englishman in amazement. "But I haven't one!"

Itmad brushed aside that statement as though it were of no importance. "His Majesty is arranging that."

"You—you mean—" The captain's eyes goggled. "You mean His Majesty is arranging a *wife* for me?"

"Certainly." Itmad looked very slightly disturbed at Hawkins' agonized tone, as if at a loss to account for such a display of emotion. "Her name is Asmin."

"But I—I've never seen the woman!"

"Naturally not!" This time the old man was genuinely shocked. "She has been brought up decently in the privacy of the harem. She has not flaunted her face in front of men."

"It's no good, Your Excellency. We don't do things like that in England."

"You are not in England now." There was infinite contempt in the Grand Vizier's voice. It suggested that England was an insignificant speck of land, in a chilly

and unpopular corner of the world, whose inhabitants might behave queerly among themselves but must learn to conduct themselves properly when they ventured abroad. "I understand that this Asmin is a beautiful girl. She is an Armenian by race, and was born an unbeliever. Since you too are an unbeliever, it will be very suitable."

"You don't understand, Your Excellency." (Never at any time, before or afterwards, did Nicky see his friend so openly and obviously panic-stricken.) "It's—it's like saying that folks ought to marry if they both have blue eyes or take the same size in shoes. You must realize—"

"And *you* must realize," interrupted the old man inexorably, "that if you reject this maiden it will be a deadly insult to the Emperor. It will imperil the success of your whole mission here. Remember, His Majesty is subject to sudden fits of temper. And he is a proud man." He tapped the hilt of his scimitar significantly, with grim humour. "He may cut off more than the negotiations!"

But he had chosen the wrong line with Hawkins. The threat of death was nothing new to the adventurer—he had faced it plenty of times on land and sea alike. But the threat of a forced marriage, to a bride he had never seen, was something new in his experience. He turned to Nicky for counsel.

"If it was anything *else*, lad! I know I've quoted often enough, 'Paris is worth a Mass'—" He stopped, ruffling his hair distractedly.

"I should think India is worth a wife, sir." Nicky could see the brighter side—not being personally involved—and he was not yet old enough to view marriage with the proper seriousness. "After all," he argued ingen-

ously, "Henry of Navarre *knew* he didn't want to be a Catholic, and yet became one for the good of his people. But you don't *know* you won't like this girl—she may be marvellous. There's at least an even chance."

Hawkins looked quite pathetic at this betrayal by the one person from whom he had expected support and comfort.

"I know what," he decided gloomily. "I shall get a chance to see her first—they do have some sort of betrothal ceremony. And if she's too terrible, I shall shoot myself before the wedding."

But Hawkins might have saved himself the worry, for Asmin proved to be a pretty young woman of considerable personality, which not even the secluded life of the harem had managed to crush. Her skin was whiter than his own, she had been baptized a Christian, and she was now little more than a slave in the imperial household. What more could a man of his chivalrous and adventurous disposition require?

The wedding was duly celebrated with a banquet, and Asmin began a new life of comparative freedom in the suite of rooms which had been placed at their disposal.

It was the very noonday of their success at Agra. The concession to trade at Surat was as good as granted. It remained only to have the necessary documents drawn up and signed with the imperial seal.

But after noonday come the shadows, and gradually, almost unnoticed, the shadows began to gather and spread, every day a little longer. . . .

It was well known that, from the first moment of the Englishmen's arrival in Agra, the Portuguese had moved heaven and earth to prevent the accomplishment of their mission. Not merely had Don Enrico da Torres pursued

his own particular line of physical violence, but his more scrupulous fellow-countrymen, like Father Bartolomeo and the other Jesuit missionaries, had conducted a minor campaign of propaganda, ranging from honest argument to unashamed slander, to discredit them in the eyes of the Great Mogul and his court.

For a long time this had no more perceptible effect than Don Enrico's poisoning and kidnapping methods. Perhaps it would never have had any result at all, had not fresh news—and bad news—come from the Red Sea.

Sir Henry Middleton, proud commander of *The Trade's Increase*, had been arrested by the Governor of Mocha and was now lying in his jail.

The information came like a thunderclap. It was a most serious blow—perhaps it would prove a fatal blow—to the gradually increasing prestige of the English in Asia.

From the moment that news arrived, there was a noticeable change in the attitude of the court towards the Englishmen. The Mogul still treated them kindly and with courtesy, but he no longer seemed so impressed by Hawkins' accounts of English greatness. Itmad ud Daulah cooled off a little, as though he had taken fright. Other courtiers were either openly pro-Portuguese, or sitting on the fence, waiting for a definite lead from the emperor.

It was an uncomfortable atmosphere. Nicky hated it. He saw much less of Hawkins now, for the captain had become devoted to the Armenian bride who had come to him in such strange circumstances. Had it not been for Gaston Lebrun, whose friendship never swerved whatever the court was saying, Nicky would have felt lonely indeed.

A month passed. There was still no sign of the trading concession. Every inquiry was met by glib excuses. They were waiting for a report from Mocrob Khan . . . they were waiting to consult such-and-such an official, who was away at Lahore . . . there was an unexpected hitch over this, that, or the other point. . . . Of Hawkins' promised salary there was no sign at all.

Always smiles, politeness, but of a somewhat chilly type. . . . Assurances given with the tongue in the cheek: "Do not worry, everything will be all right." And every day, on the Englishmen's part, the growing conviction that everything was all wrong.

Anxiously they waited for fresh news of Sir Henry Middleton. "The man's a fool," groaned Hawkins, "getting himself into trouble like that. I know him—a swashbuckling fellow, full of his own conceit. High-handed. No notion at all of how to deal with Eastern people. Serve him right if they chop his head off—only it'll make matters all the worse for us."

"It is most unfortunate, this," said Gaston. "The Portuguese have such a reputation here. They are not loved, no! but they are feared. Men still speak of the battle at Malacca, when two hundred Portuguese defeated fifteen thousand of the natives. And now your Englishman comes along in his wonderful ship—and sails straight into prison. No wonder that the court is laughing! They even laugh at themselves. They say, 'What fools we were to imagine the English could be used against the Portuguese! Even the Governor of Mocha can do as he likes with them.'"

"It's maddening," said Hawkins bitterly, "just when we were getting on so well."

A few days later came the long-awaited news, and, so

far as it went, it was good. Sir Henry was free and had rejoined his ship. But on what terms he had secured his freedom was still unknown. Meanwhile, court opinion veered round ever so slightly in the Englishmen's favour. It looked as though things might get moving again. The Mogul assured Hawkins in conversation that the concession would be granted. There was deep discomfiture in the Portuguese camp.

"Be doubly careful," Asmin warned her husband. "I have seen too much of these Portuguese. They will try some fresh plot."

Within the suite of rooms allotted to the Englishmen, she went unveiled and lived a semi-European life. She was picking up English rapidly, and looked forward to the day when she would see England. She had taken a fancy to Nicky, who taught her English songs.

"*Fear no more the heat o' the sun . . .*" she sang with an appalling English accent, and, listening, the two men thought homesickly of England with its soft climate and ever-changing skies.

"—*Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages*—"

Would that day ever come, Nicky wondered ruefully, when they would come gliding up the Thames on the flow of the tide, and see the Tower and London Bridge gleaming grey through a net of rigging?

"*Fear no more the frown o' the great*—"

What else had they done for the past months? They had hung continually on the favour of Jehan Gir. Every day they had scanned his face for frowns or smiles as anxiously as a farmer watches the sky. From bold, free merchant venturers they had degenerated into cringing courtiers, ready with any flattery so long as it would help them to get what they wanted.

A deep disgust seized Nicky, a great weariness of the whole business.

But Hawkins, watching the singer, smiled. He was more patient. He had lost the romantic illusions of youth. He had tired of fighting for things with guns and swords. There was a kind of fascination in this battle of wits instead. If he had visions still it was of rich convoys sailing between London and Surat, of gold streaming and clinking into the Hawkins family coffers, and of a great estate in Devon to which he could soon retire from the sea. Yes, it was worth fighting for. And fighting never *was* clean, anyhow. You couldn't expect it.

"*Fear not slander, censure rash—*" trilled Asmin.

Astonishing, thought Hawkins, how the song fitted the situation!

Before Asmin could finish, a messenger broke in abruptly on her recital. His Majesty demanded the immediate presence of the Englishmen.

Hawkins and Nicky exchanged glances. There was something ominous in the tone of the message. Asmin made no secret of her alarm. She flung her arms round Hawkins and burst into tears. She had heard such messages before. . . .

"Don't fret, my dear." He disentangled himself firmly but kindly. "We've done nothing. Jehan Gir is just, whatever else he is. He won't touch us."

But, as he followed the messenger, he felt less sure . . .

There were whispers in the corridors . . . people who turned away hurriedly, pretending not to see him, or not to hear his greeting . . . storm-signals.

What though the palace blazed with the hard white light of a cloudless Indian day? The shadow of danger

seemed to lie across its glittering floors. The atmosphere was electric, as if with the approach of thunder.

They were led into the Diwan-i-Khas. Jehan Gir greeted them without ceremony. His eyes blazed.

"Hawkins! You have heard the news?"

"What news, Your Majesty?"

"Of your countryman, Sir Henry Middleton."

"That he is free, Your Majesty?"

"No, no!" Jehan Gir started up from his throne. It was clear that, though he was not drunk, he had been drinking. Also, that he was in one of his rages. "No, that news is stale. Do you know what this Middleton is doing now?"

"No, sire. I trust——"

"He is acting like a common pirate!" The Mogul glared down at the Englishman. His brown hand curled over the jewelled hilt of his scimitar. "You hear? A common pirate! What do you say to that?"

Hawkins hesitated. "Perhaps your news is incorrect, Your Majesty——"

"You tell us we lie, then?"

"God forbid, Your Majesty! But . . . many rumours come from overseas, and some of them are false. The wisest and greatest of men may be misled."

"There is no doubt. We have this news confirmed and reconfirmed." Jehan Gir almost snarled the words. "By every ship coming from the Red Sea!"

"If Your Majesty would graciously consent to give me details . . ." Hawkins waited, trying to look calm. What foolery—or devilry—had Middleton been up to?

The Mogul also dropped his voice. It became silky once more, dangerous as the purr of a tiger. "This Middleton fancied himself ill-treated by the Governor of Mocha. In-

stead of lodging a protest in the right quarter, the ruffian decides to take the law into his own hands. He has imposed a blockade. He stops ships and exacts toll from them. It is not merely that our trade is suffering with the rest. What most displeases us is that a government friendly to us, and a government of true believers, should be so insulted and put upon by infidels." He glared. For the time being, his own religious shortcomings were conveniently forgotten. He was the faithful follower of Islam, defying the Christian.

"If this is true, sire, I deeply regret it—"

"You may well."

"But I implore Your Majesty to suspend judgment until details are forthcoming. I have reason to hope"—Hawkins fingered the brim of his hat nervously—"that Sir Henry will touch at Surat quite soon. If he does so, may I offer my personal assurance that he will render the humblest apologies to Your Majesty for any offences of which he may be guilty?"

"We shall see. Meanwhile, you will realize that this behaviour of the English alters everything. We cannot deal with pirates. You may go."

"Your Majesty—"

"Go!"

Hawkins shrugged his shoulders, bowed and stepped backwards to the door. As they withdrew, they heard the Mogul say: "Give our greetings to Don Enrico da Torres, and request his presence here."

CHAPTER XV

"—THE FROWN O' THE GREAT"

"THAT's upset the applecart properly," growled Hawkins as they returned.

"What happens next?"

"Wait and see, I suppose. This is how things go in a court. Up one day, down the next. Never say die, Nicky. It may be our turn again tomorrow, and the Don sent away with a flea in his ear instead."

It was easy to talk of waiting and seeing, but by the next morning even Hawkins could not restrain his impatience. He must discover if the Great Mogul's mood had been temporary, or whether it represented a new, deliberate policy. He sent word to the Grand Vizier, requesting an interview.

No, came the answer, His Excellency regretted that he was extremely busy. The emperor had suddenly decided to leave for Lahore, taking most of the court with him. They were starting tomorrow.

"Does that mean we go with them?" Nicky asked.

"Apparently not. We'll have to sit here till they come back—and meantime hope for better news."

Nicky sighed. "I *am* sick of Agra. It was tiresome enough when we were in favour, but now we're in disgrace—"

"Cheer up, lad. 'Fear no more the frown o' the great . . .'"

"I'm afraid I can't help fearing it. Gaston says we ought to clear out."

"Clear out?" The captain's eyes opened wide. "Just because of one small setback? Think what's at stake, lad! Thousands of pounds—millions in the long run. We can't expect it to drop into our laps."

"I'm only telling you what Gaston said. I don't care. We've been here so long, we might as well hang on till we accomplish something."

The Great Mogul duly departed with a long retinue of horsemen and elephants and an amazing collection of baggage. After his departure, the palace seemed quiet and empty, although in reality most of the routine work of government was still proceeding in its various buildings.

Father Bartolomeo accompanied the court to Lahore. The whereabouts of Don Enrico were uncertain. But he did not permit his existence to be neglected for long.

The two Englishmen were taking their favourite walk, in the cool of the evening, along the rolling sand-dunes beside the Jumna. There was no one in sight except a coolie in a nearby field.

The attack was therefore completely unexpected. The attackers seemed to rise from the very ground.

There were four of them, naked save for turban and loin-cloth, and armed with scimitars and small round shields. At all events, their intentions were clear.

"Look out!" yelled Hawkins, and already, even as he spoke, his own sword flashed in his hand. Nicky was only a fraction of a second behind him. "Back to back," the captain grunted. "Hold 'em off till Itmad's man gets here."

He sent his voice rolling across the twilit field to the coolie. The man stopped, stared, and began to run—away from the fight. Only then did Hawkins realize the full gravity of the position. The man really *was* a coolie,

not, as they had assumed, one of their friendly "shadows." Of course, there *were* no shadows, now! Itmad ud Daulah had withdrawn his protection without saying a word.

The assassins came dancing in to the attack, light and silent on their bare feet. Swords clashed. It was a hopelessly unequal fight. The natives handled their shields so deftly that even Hawkins could not penetrate their defences. And it was two to one. Had it lasted a minute, Nicky would have been cut down, and after that Hawkins would have succumbed to the sheer weight of numbers.

But it did not last a minute. Hawkins felt the circumstances justified more than pure fencing. With his left hand he drew the pistol from his belt, cocked it, and (the pistol luckily not missing fire) blew out the brains of his more dangerous adversary. The other fell back a pace instinctively, Hawkins pressed after him, and, by the sheer fury of his attack, got past his guard and ran him through. Spinning round with a yell, the captain was just in time to save Nicky from an unpleasant end. The surviving pair of natives, seeing victory snatched from their grasp, turned and fled for their lives.

"It seems to me," Hawkins panted, "your young French friend wasn't far wrong. We ought to have cleared out. Perhaps it isn't too late."

Nicky looked surprised. It was not like Hawkins to talk in this strain. "You don't think the Mogul has anything to do with this?"





"No, we'll have to depend on our own resources till they come back."

"Couldn't we follow them?"

"We're safer in the palace—if we take reasonable care. And there's Asmin . . . I don't want to leave her."

"I'd forgotten Asmin."

They made their way back to the citadel at a brisk pace, their hands on their swords and their eyes scouring the shadows at the roadside. But there was no further attack upon them. That night they barricaded their doors and slept uneasily. The next morning, Hawkins made discreet inquiries about travel facilities. The officials were polite but vague, and quite unhelpful.

He reported the conversation to Nicky. "That seems to settle it," he said grimly. "They don't seem to want us to leave, either for Lahore or Surat. For all their excuses, they made that pretty plain. No horses, no servants, no permits . . . Whether we want to or not, we must stay. We're virtually prisoners."

"I don't like that, sir. Looks as though the Don has something fresh up his sleeve."

"Just what I thought. He must have been spending a small fortune in bribes. The whole gang seem completely under his thumb."

"There's another thing—I don't know whether you've noticed?" Nicky hesitated, then went on: "We've acquired a new type of shadow—but not one appointed by Itmad, I'm pretty sure."

"You know, Nicky—" Hawkins tossed his hat across the room with an impatient gesture, and mopped the sweat from his temples, "—this place is giving me the creeps! I've had enough of it, more than enough. How anyone could stand it for years, like Gaston . . .!"

"Gaston's ill," Nicky remarked, "which is unlucky, because he'd have been a great stand-by just now."

"Ill?"

"Yes."

"I'm suspicious of all illness here! Does *he* think he's ill, or . . . ?"

"Oh, I see what you mean. No, it's genuine enough; no poison this time. A touch of fever. He's had it before, he says, and once you get it into your bones, you can't get it out . . . For some things, I'm really glad."

"Glad?"

"Well, although I'd like to have Gaston supporting us, it doesn't seem quite fair to mix him up in our affairs, now we're so badly out of favour."

"M'm. I see your point. After all, the young man's got to go on living here, long after we've departed. Yes. Don't want to make things too awkward for him."

At sunset came a message from Gaston. It was a verbal message. The young Frenchman wanted to see Sahib Fowler—at once.

"Is it all right?" Hawkins nodded meaningfully in the direction of the messenger.

"Yes, sir, I know this man. Gaston swears he's reliable. And it's only a little way." Nicky buckled on his sword and followed the servant downstairs and along the passages to the artist's quarters.

Gaston was tossing on his bed. A fresh attack of fever had just seized him. He was shivering violently, and was half delirious.

"Is that you, Nicky?"

"Yes. Can I do anything?"

"It's all dark. I can't see you. We ought to have

brought a torch. We'll never find our way without a torch."

Nicky put his hand on the man's burning forehead. "Don't worry, Gaston, I'm here. There's a lamp on the table, but we didn't want to hurt your eyes."

"Eyes, yes, eyes! Everywhere! They're watching. You'd think they could see in the dark. Nicky, go away. Go away!"

"But you asked me to come. What is it?"

Gaston groped for his hand and pressed it urgently. "Nicky, I'm ill, I hardly know what I'm saying. But you must go, you and Hawkins . . . It's tonight. Tonight, do you hear? If you stop here another night, it'll be the finish."

"Gaston! Do you mean that? Do you know something?"

"Yes, there's no mistake . . . no mistake . . . no mistake. It's tonight. Barricades won't save you. Enrico has it planned. Twenty of them, they said . . . Go away, Nicky, it's your only chance."

"I'll tell Hawkins——"

"But go. The captain of the guard has been bribed. It's no good asking for protection—no good, do you understand? And it's no good trying to leave the palace. The sentries have their orders . . . That spider . . . He thinks he has you safe enough. Flies in the web! Little helpless flies in the web!"

Gaston raised himself on his pillow and began to laugh. Then the fit passed as suddenly as it had come. He fell back, exhausted but rational again.

"There's only one chance," he whispered. "The secret passages! There's a way into them from Hawkins' bed-chamber. You know the old Persian tapestry—the hunt-

ing-scene? It's behind that. I don't know how it opens—we must find that out. And then there's a passage leading right under the walls of the citadel—it comes out in the open country, among the tombs. Clever of them, wasn't it? They knew people wouldn't pry about among the dead!"

"Behind the Persian tapestry," Nicky repeated.

"Yes. But I'll guide you."

"You can't, Gaston! You're not fit to get up."

"I *must!* You couldn't find your way by yourselves. I shall be better in a moment, when I've rested. I *must* be better."

But it was quite clear that Gaston was unable to stand, let alone walk. After a frantic effort to raise himself, he collapsed on the bed, and another fit of shivering gripped him. His mind struggled desperately on the borders of consciousness.

"I *must!* It's death to go into those passages unless you know. . . . Death-traps. . . . Wells. . . . I *must* show you."

"Can't you tell me? I'll remember."

"Too much . . . too much. . . . But I'll try. . . . From your room it would be stairs, then first turning on the right, ignore next two turnings, turn to the right again . . . no, the left, coming that way! Oh!" Gaston groaned with despair. "It is impossible! I cannot think, I cannot remember! I can see it all plain in my mind's eye; I can see those tigers, but—it is impossible, I cannot count the turnings, I cannot . . ." He lapsed into delirium.

Nicky stood by the bedside, wondering what to do. Should he return post-haste to Hawkins, or wait in the hope of Gaston's returning to consciousness? He decided

to wait, at least for a little while. It was unlikely that there would be any attack so early in the evening, and Hawkins was already taking general precautions. There was nothing further they could do in that direction.

Fortunately, it was not long before the next lucid interval. Gaston's voice came weakly from the shadows:

"Are you still there, Nicky?"

"Yes."

"No one else?"

"No one at all."

"Nicky, you see how I am. I can't stir. And your only chance is those passages."

"We'll manage something without you, don't worry. You don't know Hawkins as I do. He'd get out of any fix."

Gaston shook his head feebly. "It's no good, unless you know the way—or have a plan. And I can't draw one. My head's bursting. I can't remember things properly. I can hardly see out of my eyes."

"You once told us about a copy," Nicky prompted him.

"Yes, the copy! That's it! Listen—you're sure there's no one there?"

"Not a soul. Go on."

"The copy is in the Diwan-i-Khas. It'll be dangerous for you, going there, but the hall itself will be safe enough. It is not used during the Mogul's absence."

"Where do I look?" Nicky's voice was urgent. He could tell that another feverish bout was approaching. The bed shook gently. Gaston was shivering and twitching. He must get the information now, before his friend relapsed once more into delirium.

"The Diwan-i-Khas. . . . You remember the pillars

round the throne? How they are inlaid with jewels? Listen. It was on the third pillar from the right that my own work was done. Beautiful work! I've never done anything better. I've never worked in such rich materials, before or since . . .”

“Yes, yes! It's magnificent. I've seen it. But where is the plan of the passages?”

“I am telling you. The third pillar from the right. About knee-high from the floor.”

“Yes?”

“It is in the pattern. You understand?”

“In the pattern?”

“The jewels are inlaid to form a map. And I have engraved lines in the stone to make it plainer. I hope you will be able to understand it.” A fresh doubt seemed to assail him. “I made it, you see, only to refresh my memory. To you, perhaps, it will be difficult.”

“I'll copy it on a piece of paper.”

“Yes. It is impossible to carry it away in your head. But listen—and remember: the line of rubies stands for the main route out of the city; agates are used for staircases; lapis lazuli means a blind-alley, a turning you must not take; jasper means danger—a trap of some kind—but if you can keep to the line of rubies you will not meet any traps. . . . Can you remember all this?”

Nicky repeated the key correctly. Then, as a thought struck him, he asked: “A chart's no use if you don't know where you are. How can we tell our starting-point?”

“Quite right!” Gaston's teeth were chattering. With an effort he controlled himself. “You will see a circle of jade in the centre of the design. That is the tiger-pit—you remember how the back of the tigers' caves has a

secret gate into the main passage? Good. Count back from there, looking to the left along the line of rubies. . . . The third little group of agates is the staircase from your room. . . . The third staircase . . . The third pillar . . . And the tigers—the tigers' eyes, they too can see in the dark. . . ." Gaston began to ramble again.

But Nicky had the information he needed. He stepped across the room to the table, on which stood the lamp. There was an inkhorn, pen, paper. He scribbled down the key and the other details Gaston had told him. On another sheet he wrote:

"Thank you for all your help. Perhaps we shall meet again. Au revoir!—N."

He stepped back to the bedside. Gaston was muttering unintelligibly. Nicky slipped the note under his pillow, took the other writing materials, and went.

Better make for the Diwan-i-Khas without more delay. Luckily, he could find it without difficulty, for he had been there several times. The corridor leading to it was deserted, and the hall of audience was itself in pitch darkness. He seized a lamp from its bracket outside the door and tiptoed in. The dim light flickered eerily on the glistening marble walls. If anyone saw that light from outside and investigated, he was done for. There could be no plausible excuse for his presence.

The third pillar from the right. About knee-high from the floor.

He set down the lamp on the steps of the throne and knelt. At first sight the elaborate inlay-work and engraving seemed no different from all the rest. Then, as his eyes grew accustomed to the dim light, he picked out

the single line of rubies, threading its tortuous way through the design. Here, too, was the circle of jade, just as Gaston had described.

He dipped his pen in the ink and began to transfer the plan to paper. A broad black line for the rubies, dotted lines for the wrong turnings to be avoided, and so on. It was unnecessary to copy the whole complicated network. The byways could be omitted.

He worked hurriedly but carefully, straining his eyes over the inlaid design. One mistake might ruin everything. Apart from the pitfalls and traps at which Gaston had hinted, a man could lose himself in that maze and wander till he was exhausted. There must be no errors.

He finished the drawing and began to check it over, detail by detail, comparing it with the design. A blind-alley to the left . . . a staircase in front . . . another staircase on the right, to be avoided. . . . Yes, yes. . . . Correct. . . .

It was then that he heard footsteps outside in the corridor . . . footsteps, the ring of spear-butts on the tiles, and hoarse voices in dispute.

He stiffened into utter silence, his hand closing on the cold hilt of his sword. The men had stopped outside the double doors of the hall. He could hear their conversation plainly through the wood.

"I saw a light, I tell you! I was in the courtyard."

"It was fancy. Or perhaps a djinn! Evil spirits are best left alone."

"A thief more likely! Do you call yourself a guard? We should make a search."

"How could there be a thief? Only a fool would go into the Diwan-i-Khas at this time of night!"

"That's right," added a new voice. "Haven't you heard that the spirit of Akbar haunts the Diwan?"

"Old wives' tales!" The first speaker snorted. "Look —there is a lamp missing from its bracket! Do djinns need lamps when they walk?"

"We shall need more lights ourselves, if we're to search the place. Shall I go?"

"Yes, brother. Bring torches, and some of the others. Yussuf and I will stay by the door till you come. There is no other door, and the windows are too narrow for a man. Whoever may be inside, if they are mortal, they are trapped."

CHAPTER XVI

PERIL UNDERGROUND

NICKY had been petrified throughout this conversation. Only when he heard the retreating footsteps of the soldier did he recover the use of his own limbs.

What was to be done? As the unseen speaker had said, there was no exit from the hall except the one door, which was guarded. Should he try to fight his way out, while his enemies were only two to one, or should he wait for certain discovery, and endeavour to explain his presence with some manufactured excuse?

But what excuse *could* he offer? With the captain of the guard already corrupted by Portuguese bribes, he would stand no chance. At the very least, he would be clapped into a cell while further inquiries were made . . . a cell from which he might, or might not, emerge alive. And meanwhile Hawkins would be alone and in ignorance of the attack which was to be made that very night!

Suddenly his brain cleared. Fool, not to think of it before! Surely there would be a *secret* exit from the Diwan-i-Khas, opening into the rest of the subterranean system! He pored over the chart. Yes, it looked as if there was.

But there was no indication of its whereabouts.

It was maddening. Somewhere in that spacious hall, still lit by the pale flicker of his lamp, there was a hidden door to safety—and he had no means of discovering it.

Search? It would take hours to search the Diwan, tapping each wall and flagstone, shifting each rug and

tapestry. He could not count on more than another five minutes' grace. By then, the soldier would have returned with torches and reinforcements . . . numbers would help the guards to conquer their fears of the supernatural . . . the doors would fold back, and they would rush in with levelled spears.

He bit his lip. His mind was working furiously, but he was cold and collected. Capture seemed so certain that he was resigned to it. The problem of the hidden exit was just a little mental puzzle, something to play with, a pastime during the minutes of waiting. He had no expectation of solving it.

Where would the Mogul be *likely* to have his secret door?

He would want it near the throne. Nicky pictured occasions on which such a door might be used. . . . If, for instance, there was a mass-attempt at assassination, it would be needed as a line of retreat for the Mogul. . . .

Nicky mounted the steps of the throne, holding his lamp high, and parted the hangings which served as background to the high, gilded chair. Instead of the plain wall beneath, there was an elaborate screen of teak, exquisitely carved, with lions, elephants, and other animals.

At that moment Nicky was guilty of a mistake which probably saved his life.

He jumped to the conclusion that so fine a screen would never have been covered with tapestries if it was only a screen. The tapestries must have been added as further camouflage for what it concealed. (In which he was quite wrong, because they had been hung up to hide the carved animals, which had shocked members of the court by breaking the Moslem commandment against "graven images.")

It was a fortunate mistake. But for it, Nicky would never have run his fingers over the woodwork, pressing and pulling until he found one of the lions sliding sideways, and a section of the screen rolling back into musty darkness.

At that same moment he heard the double doors flung back at the opposite end of the hall, and a babble of voices echoing hollowly. Thanking heaven that he had not, in his first moment of panic, put out the lamp, he stepped silently through the opening and closed it behind him.

For years afterwards soldiers spoke of the unearthly light that had glimmered for an instant above the throne of the departed Akbar. Some swore to a vision of the monarch himself, in full armour. . . .

Meanwhile, Nicky found himself in the secret passages, his life dependent on the sketch-map he clutched in his left hand, and the lamp he carried in his right. If the light went out, he was done for. . . .

Here was a side-turning, and another in the opposite wall. That was excellent—just as the map showed them. His spirits soared. All was well.

He would go straight to Hawkins' room, using the secret entrance to it. It would be easier to discover the mechanism of the door, if he approached from the inside, so perhaps after all this last adventure might prove a blessing. The distance was not great. Barely two minutes elapsed before he found himself climbing the staircase.

What a surprise Hawkins would get if he were in the room! It would be as well to call out as the door opened. Nicky wanted no pistol shots whistling through the Persian tapestry, nor did he want to be stabbed like Polonius in the play.

There was no concealment about the mechanism on

this inner side. A metal lever, set in the wall, sent the door rolling sideways. Even as it did so, a pistol cracked deafeningly in the room beyond, and his nostrils were filled, not with the expected fresh air, but with the bitter reek of gunpowder.

He could see nothing—the heavy tapestry blotted out the room. Thrusting the precious chart into his belt, and putting down the lamp on the stairs, he pulled back the hangings and stared into the room.

To his relief, it contained only Hawkins and Asmin. But the way in which the furniture was piled against the door and window, and Hawkins was reloading his pistol, indicated that unwelcome visitors were not far away.

"Don't shoot, sir!"

"Nicky!"

Nicky glanced anxiously at the door leading to the outer rooms of the suite. It was a light affair, never intended to stand a siege. It was already splintered with bullet-holes. Several inches of spear-point showed through one crack. Once it was broken down, the heap of stools and bedding behind it would be no obstacle to the attackers.

"You're just in time," said Hawkins coolly. "I suppose we can go through there?"

"That's the idea. We can get right out of the city that way."

"Splendid."

"Better take the lamp, sir. I've got one, but I don't know how much longer it will last."

"I'll carry it," Asmin offered. She was wonderfully calm in the face of danger.

"Let's go then," said the captain. "That door won't hold much longer."

Indeed, it split across even as he spoke. A face appeared . . . hands began to tear at the barricade. . . . Hawkins fired a final shot, and jumped through the secret door. Nicky pulled the lever, and the baffled shouts of the assassins were blotted out.

"Straight down the stairs," Nicky directed, his voice shaking a little with the reaction. "And we'd better hurry. They saw how we went. They may find how this thing works, and come after us."

At the foot of the staircase he took the lead, map and lamp in hand. It was to be hoped that their enemies would not find the way to pursue them, since it was impossible for Nicky to go very fast, whereas anyone following them would have only to make towards the sound of voices and footsteps, without pausing to study a chart.

"What's that?" demanded Hawkins suddenly.

"Yes, I heard someone," Asmin said.

Nicky tried to reassure them. "I expect it was from the tiger-pit. We pass it quite soon."

"No, it was human—and behind us," Hawkins insisted.

They all listened. Sure enough, there were low voices, drawing ever nearer. And now a glimmer of torchlight danced redly at the last bend in the passage behind them.

"They're after us," said Hawkins between his teeth. "But we've got a better chance here. Take Asmin on, Nicky. I'll hold 'em back a bit."

"Oh, no," Asmin protested, "we mustn't separate!"

"Come on a bit further," Nicky urged. "I've an idea."

The smell of the tiger-pit was now rank in their nostrils. A terrifying snarl rang through the darkness ahead. As they came level with the barred gate of the pit, their

lamps were reflected by pairs of yellow-green eyes, blazing furiously.

Behind them came the patter of naked feet. . . .

"We'll let out the tigers," said Nicky, "it's our only chance."

"Let out——!"

"It's all right. The gate's made for that. . . . Don't let them claw me through the bars! Beat them back with your sword!"

Sweat poured from his face as he struggled to draw the bolt. It was rusty with disuse. Their pursuers were in sight now, coming round the last bend. The torchlight flashed on spear-points and scimitars . . . and all the time the tigers were rearing themselves up against the bars, snapping and snarling at the sword which kept them back.

For an awful moment or two Nicky thought that the door would never open in time, that their pursuers would be upon them first. Then, with a suddenness which startled him, the bolt shot back and the half-gate clanged back against him, exactly filling the breadth of the passage. With a ferocious roar a huge Bengal tiger leapt through the opening, spun round on its springy feet, and leapt towards the advancing natives. Behind it loped another. . . .

The fugitives did not wait to see the effect of this meeting. One thing was certain: there would be no further pursuit for some considerable time. Pausing only to make sure that the half-gate was firmly jammed across the passage, and could not be clawed back by the tigers, they hastened on. Terrible cries and howls echoed down the corridor in their wake.

There was no time to waste. There was the possibility

that someone—perhaps the captain of the guard—shared the secret of the passages, and that, guessing their destination, he would send horsemen to intercept them at the outlet among the tombs. It was not probable, but the danger had to be reckoned with. In any case, none of them had any desire to linger in the underground passages a moment longer than was necessary.

They hurried too much. Once, they took a wrong turning, and pulled up, not a second too soon, on the lip of a chasm yawning across their path. They swung round, cold fear clutching them. But fortunately they had not strayed more than a few yards from the right path, and, by retracing their steps carefully, they were able to find it again.

Would they never reach the end of their subterranean journey? Even Nicky, whose third visit it was to the strange underground world of Agra, was beginning to feel the strain of their oppressive surroundings. His other journeys had been comparatively short. This time they were zig-zagging their way beneath the whole city.

At long last they mounted a short flight of stairs, ending in an overhead slab. Hawkins put his broad shoulders to it and heaved. For a few seconds it defied him, then it rose silently, and a breath of fresh night air rushed in.

"Carefully," whispered Hawkins, "not a sound till we see who's there."

He lifted the stone and laid it gently aside. The others saw his burly figure silhouetted against the brilliance of the Indian stars. Blowing out their lamps, they mounted after him.

All round them were the sepulchres, white and glistening. A few hundred yards away loomed the dark walls

of Agra. There was not a sign of movement anywhere.

"Safe," murmured Hawkins in a tone of deep satisfaction.

Safe! echoed Nicky in his heart. Alone in the heart of an unfriendly empire, six hundred miles from the sea and any hope of rescue! *Safe?*

CHAPTER XVII

JUNGLE JOURNEY

THE sudden tropical dawn found them on the outskirts of a Hindu village, some eight miles south-west of Agra. Asmin was by this time exhausted. Plucky as she was, her feet were quite unused to outdoor exercise—and so were her slippers, which the hard road had already worn to the thinness of paper. The men, though less tired, were ravenously hungry.

Food was the first essential. They had a small amount of money with them, which would suffice for immediate needs. Asmin had some jewellery. There were also the two lamps, one of which, being solid silver, should fetch a good price if they could dispose of it without arousing suspicion.

Their course of action was clearly marked before them : they all agreed that they should put as many miles between them and Agra, and as quickly, as possible; and that it was better to make straight for Surat, in the hope that after all Sir Henry Middleton would call there, than to gamble once more on the emperor's favour, by seeking him at Lahore.

"We'll be all right," Hawkins reassured them, "once we're well away from Agra. We're not fugitives from justice. It isn't as though the Great Mogul had given any orders to detain us. Except that we haven't any documents, and we're travelling without a retinue, there's nothing unusual about us."

"Those things are, in themselves, unusual enough," said Asmin mildly. "But you are right. Now we are out of the jurisdiction of the captain of the guard, there is no reason why anyone should wish to hinder us. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"Don Enrico is not a very reasonable person. He may find ways and means . . ."

Hawkins chuckled, resolutely banishing care. "The trouble with you is, you want some breakfast. So do I. Let's go on into the village."

They walked on, greeted by the howling of innumerable dogs. The village was just waking to life. Women in gay-coloured *saris* were fetching water from the tank, fanning fires into a blaze, and cooking rice. People stood round cleaning their teeth with immense seriousness and concentration, using a small twig for the purpose and continuing for five or ten minutes. But even the tooth-cleaning was interrupted to welcome the three bedraggled strangers who had appeared at so unusual an hour from the outside world. For the first time Nicky was really able to appreciate to the full the natural hospitality which seemed such a prominent element in the Indian character.

A fowl was immediately killed, cleaned, and put in the pot. A new, more savoury smell began to steal out upon the morning air. Much as the trio wanted to hurry on, they could not grudge the delay. Nicky vowed that if Don Enrico had himself appeared in the distance, followed by a whole army of bribed assassins, he would have fought the lot of them rather than flee leaving the bird untasted.

Luckily, no such dilemma confronted them. They were able to eat their meal in peace—if "peace" is a fair

description of a breakfast watched by a staring, interested crowd of men, women, and children.

During the meal the headman informed them that there was a bullock-cart about to set out across the plains. It was going to a village two days' journey away. It would be slow, uncomfortable, and unworthy of such distinguished travellers, but at least it would be better than walking.

Asmin agreed with heartfelt enthusiasm, and an hour later they rumbled off on a primitive, high-wheeled vehicle, behind a pair of the most mournful-looking oxen on which they had ever laid eyes. The driver, by way of contrast, was a lively youngster of about fifteen, his scraggy form naked except for a loin-cloth. He chattered like a monkey the whole day, and they replied so far as their Hindustani permitted.

It was towards noon when, looking back, they saw a cloud of tawny dust on the road behind, and rapidly overtaking them.

"Someone in a hurry," said the boy with a grin. "Perhaps it would be better if you walked into this bamboo clump. I will wait for you a little further on, when they have passed."

"Mulk, my boy," said Hawkins, helping Asmin down from the cart, "you have more wisdom than I had imagined."

The trio hastened into the feathery shade of the bamboo plantation. Three or four minutes later, they heard the drumming of hoofs on the sun-baked earth of the road, and the jingle of harness as a considerable cavalcade swept to a halt beside the waggon. An imperious voice cried out in Hindustani:

"Have you seen two Feringhees, and a woman?"

Mulk's answer came in a miserable whine, quite unlike his normal cheerful chatter. He sounded terrified.

"Yes, your honour, I have . . ."

Nicky's knuckles whitened as he gripped his sword. So the boy was going to betray them after all!

"Where did you see them?"

"They were in this cart, your honour."

"So they told us at your village! It is well you did not lie to us. . . . When did they leave you?"

"It would be about an hour ago, your honour. We were overtaken by a party with horses—horse-dealers, they were. The Feringhees were in a hurry. They made a bargain. They took horses and made off, *that way*."

"Curse them! That was an hour ago!"

"Or perhaps two, your honour."

The unseen horsemen gave an order. The cavalcade galloped on furiously, and in a few moments had vanished from sight and sound, leaving only a haze of dust to mark their passing.

"It is all right, now," Mulk called cheerfully. They came out of the bamboo and climbed on to the cart again.

"You lied well," said Nicky, "but why did you lie—just for us?"

The boy grinned from ear to ear. "They were soldiers. We are farmers. The soldiers live on the farmers. We do not love them very much. And when they also call us dogs of unbelievers . . ."

"That is not the wish of the emperor," interrupted Asmin, who liked Jehan Gir. "Both he and the mighty Akbar wished the Moslems and the Hindus to live together in peace."

"All soldiers are bad," Mulk insisted. "Our priest tells us it is a sin to take life, even a snake. Soldiers eat

up the land like locusts. A third part of all our crops goes in tax to the Mogul—and that means to the soldiers.” Nothing would shake him from these arguments.

They were very sorry when, on the morning of the third day, they had to take leave of Mulk. He had been a pleasant companion, and set them well on their journey across the plains. Asmin’s feet had healed quickly, and she now felt ready for anything.

But walking was a slow mode of progress (though faster than bullock-cart) when there were six hundred miles to be covered. Speed was important. True, it would be inconvenient to arrive at the coast before Sir Henry Middleton arrived, but it would be far worse to find that he had been and gone. In that event, almost their sole hope of seeing England again would be to undertake the tremendous overland journey through Persia and Constantinople.

On the first day they managed fifteen miles, on the second little more than ten, and on the third, getting into their stride, they covered nearly eighteen. The walking had to be done in the cool of the early morning and the evening. In the noonday heat they rested in the shade of plantations. At night they never failed to find hospitality in a village.

Hawkins calculated that, allowing for minor accidents and an occasional day of rest, they might hope to accomplish the journey in two months. Would that be too late?

It was an uncomfortably long time.

Happily, on the fourth day, they were overtaken by a caravan of merchants, bound for Surat. After a considerable amount of haggling they accepted some of Asmin’s jewels, with the two lamps thrown in, in return for

the use of three saddle-horses for the duration of the journey.

This was a double advantage. Progress was much quicker, and now that the trio were members of a party they were far less conspicuous and liable to interrogation. With this point in mind, the two men also invested in native clothes, rolling up their own in bundles tied to the saddle. Their faces and arms had long been tanned. Only their feet and ankles, exposed now for the first time, showed a remarkable whiteness to any close observer.

In this manner they crossed the plains without incident and climbed the jungly foothills towards the ridgeline of the Vindhya Mountains.

At this point, from a traveller bound for Agra, they received good but tantalizing news. A great Feringhee vessel was lying off Surat, anxious to trade, but, as it was not Portuguese, the Governor was refusing to permit it. It seemed likely, said the man, that the ship would sail away soon, as there was nothing to be done.

Hawkins made more calculations.

Proceeding at their present rate, it would take them another ten days to reach Surat. There were still two big rivers and a range of mountains to cross. By hard riding—the road would not permit of a really furious speed—the time might be halved.

But the caravan could not go any faster, and the merchants absolutely refused to let their horses out of their sight. The beasts had been hired, they said, not sold, and all Hawkins' assurances that they would be found in the stables at Surat, when the merchants arrived there, were of no avail. Nor had the trio sufficient money or jewels left to purchase the horses outright.

"There's only one thing," Hawkins said. "We'll have to *take* them."

"Steal them?" inquired Nicky.

"Borrow them—without leave." Hawkins chuckled. "The merchants can have what's left of them when they reach Surat. We'll have to ride fast, Nicky, so fast that nobody can possibly catch us up on the road and denounce us as thieves. It's rather a desperate gamble, but it's worth it. We can't let that ship sail without us."

They waited (rather meanly, Nicky could not help thinking) until they were safely across the Narbada River, which would have presented some difficulty had they been alone. Their opportunity came immediately afterwards, while the party was resting in the shade by the water's edge.

Hawkins mounted while the merchants were still squatting beside their tethered animals. "Come on," he called to them, "we've wasted enough time."

One of them scowled. "We shall move when we wish. The Feringhee is always in a hurry."

Asmin, taking her cue from her husband, had mounted her own horse and was ambling up the road. Nicky stood ready, pretending to examine a girth, but watching out of the corner of his eye. Asmin had already meandered nearly a hundred yards before the leader of the merchants rose to his feet and called angrily:

"We shall not move for half an hour yet. Get off that horse, and let it rest!"

"Stay where you are!" Hawkins whipped out his pistol from the convenient folds of his native dress, and levelled it at the merchant. "Now, Nicky!"

The young man set foot in the stirrup and swung his leg over the high saddle. "Right!" he called, and

spurred up the road. Hawkins wheeled his horse and followed with a thunder of hoofs. Behind them, the merchants poured out a flood of maledictions. After some delay there was a musket-shot or two, but the ball whistled wide. By that time the fugitives were well up the mountainside, and screened for the most part by intervening vegetation.

"They'll never catch us," panted Hawkins. "They won't dare to leave their goods unprotected, and there aren't enough of them to split into two parties."

Nicky turned in his saddle to answer. "It'll be all right so long as nobody overtakes *them*—soldiers, I mean, who'd take notice of their complaint and come after us."

"We must chance that. And now—it's hell-for-leather to Surat and the good ship *The Trade's Increase*!"

Only an optimist would have employed the phrase "hell-for-leather" to describe the pace at which they crossed the Saturas. Over most of the route a trot was barely possible, and any attempt at a gallop would have been suicide. But they certainly got on far faster than they had with the caravan, and no one at all overtook them in their long ride up and down the winding valleys.

On the first evening, they were fortunate enough to reach one of the villages in which they had been entertained on their journey up-country. They were welcomed with great warmth and enthusiasm, and, for the space of one evening, were able to forget that they were disgraced court favourites, turned by misfortune into little better than horse-thieves, and to pretend that (as their hosts fondly imagined) they were still distinguished foreigners.

On the second evening they were not so fortunate. They had crossed the wild summit of the range—it was comforting to think that now the little streams they saw

were flowing southwards into the Tapti, which in turn would sweep its waters down to Surat where (unless *The Trade's Increase* had already sailed away in despair) they would lap against her stout, English-timbered sides.

They had passed the first of the upland hamlets, and, in their desire to push on with all possible speed, had overshot the normal night's halting-place, in the hope of finding another suitable village a few miles further on. But in this they were disappointed. Night came down without any sign of habitation in front of them, and in view of the dangerous steepness of the road and the exhaustion of their horses, they decided there was nothing for it but to bivouac in the open forest.

There was a convenient dell just below the level of the road—a spot where a fresh spring came gurgling out of the rocks, and there was abundance of brushwood for fuel.

"If we keep a big fire, we shall be all right," said Asmin, trying to appear unconcerned. "They say that even the tigers will not attack if there is a fire."

"Better keep a watch, too," Hawkins decided. "Nicky and I will take it in turns."

They collected a tremendous pile of branches and, to be on the safe side, lit two fires some distance apart. The horses were hobbled close by. The chief drawback was their own lack of food. They had nothing but a handful of dried dates, and it was too dark to search for fruit in the surrounding jungle. However, they comforted themselves, the next village could not be much farther on, and they should reach it well before noon on the morrow.

The night, which should have been full of dramatic incident, proved merely long and dreary. There were noises in plenty, but only those of the small, harmless

creatures of the forest. To hear a man-eating tiger, it seemed, one had to go to Agra.

At sunrise a bored and sleepy-eyed Nicky unhobbled the horses, watered them, and saddled them. His companions were still sleeping soundly on the hard ground. He decided to give them another minute or two. Perhaps he could find a few edible berries or nuts to share with them by way of breakfast.

It was this desire which, by leading him into a thick patch of bushes, brought him face to face with the bear.

He saw it in the nick of time.

It reared up on its short hind-legs, black save for the vivid white horse-shoe on its chest. Its fore-paws, cruelly clawed, hovered ready to smash down into his face.

There was no room to step back. But in his belt was Hawkins' pistol, given him for the period during which he was keeping watch. He drew it out, pointed it at the white patch on the dark fur, and pulled the trigger.

The pistol cracked, the bear gave a snarling cough, and crashed over into the bushes. Nicky ducked and, heedless of scratches, forced himself out of range of those savagely milling claws. He could hear his friends calling, hear the whinnying of the horses and the nervous tattoo of their hoofs.

"What's the matter?" demanded Hawkins, meeting him with drawn sword.

"A bear!" he panted. "I startled it and it came for me. But it's all right—"

"It's not all right—you've stampeded the horses. They've gone charging down through the woods, and goodness knows where we'll find them, or what condition they'll be in!"

"Oh, hang it, I should have left them hobbled."

"Never mind. Let's get after them before they get too far."

Without stopping to pay any further attention to the bear, they all started down the mountainside. For a time they could hear the horses crashing through the under-growth below, then the noise ceased. "They've probably stopped and begun to graze," said Hawkins philosophically.

They found one of the saddles a few minutes later, torn from the horse's back by overhanging bushes. But for all their shouting and whistling they could find no other trace of the panic-stricken animals.

"Stop yelling a moment," Hawkins ordered. "What was that?"

They all listened. From the mountainside above them came a long howl.

"Sounds more like a dog," said Nicky.

"It *is* a dog," Asmin confirmed, "a wild dog."

The howl was echoed by another. Soon it swelled to a chorus. "Sounds like a regular pack," Hawkins murmured.

Asmin's soft eyes were suddenly dilated with terror.

"That's it, Will—and *they're on our scent!*"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WILD DOGS

THEY looked at each other. Nicky remembered those words he had heard so many months before:

"They are tireless. They can outrun the deer—wear him down until he drops with exhaustion. So there is not much chance for a man!"

Not much chance—

He pulled himself together angrily. They had come safely through all the dangers of Agra, they were not going to succumb now, within a few miles of their goal, to a pack of curs, however ferocious.

"Come along," said Hawkins brusquely, "they're above us. We'll have to go downhill."

"They'll catch up with us in no time," panted Asmin despairingly, but she let herself be hurried down a thin track which ribboned its way through the under-growth.

"Yes," Hawkins admitted, "but perhaps we'll find some bigger trees we can climb, or a rock, maybe."

"If we come to a stream," Nicky suggested, trotting behind them, "we could splash about in it and throw them off the trail."

No one answered. They kept their breath for the headlong race down the hillside path. The barking had ceased behind them. After a few minutes Asmin stopped running—she was a plump girl, and soon got out of breath. Hawkins said:

"There's a chance they've gone after the horses instead of us. And if the horses have each gone a different way the odds are three to one in our favour."

Nicky thought this kind of arithmetic rather too optimistic, but he did not want to discourage Asmin, so he let it pass. She was the next to speak:

"But even if they have, Will, it's bad enough. We seem to be going right away from the road, and if we do find our way back to it, we shall have no horses—"

"I'm not worrying about that, my dear. The Tapti is somewhere at the bottom of this mountain. Once we get down to it, we've only got to follow the bank to the sea."

Upon this complacent conversation burst a fresh chorus of blood-curdling barks and howls—considerably nearer than the first.

"It *is* us they're chasing," said Nicky unnecessarily. They all started to run again, but it was obvious that Asmin could not maintain the pace for long. Not that it mattered much. The fastest runner could not have hoped to outdistance a wild dog pack with its blood up.

"Water," gasped Hawkins, "only chance!"

"Some down there to the left, sir! Hear it?"

"Ay! Come on, my dear!"

They plunged down through the trailing creepers, thrusting aside the thorny branches which barred their way at every stride. Somewhere in front they could hear the tumult of a mountain-torrent.

Nicky prayed fervently as he ran—that the stream would be big enough to form an obstacle to the beasts pursuing them, but not be so deep or so wild that it was impassable to men. If it was, then they were done

for—as finally as if they had come up against a stone wall.

But the torrent would have been no obstacle to anyone or anything. It was one of those streams whose noise is out of all proportion to the volume of water they carry. And its narrow bed was so littered with boulders that it was possible to cross dry-shod over a series of natural stepping-stones.

The fugitives made no attempt to do so.

They jumped knee-deep into one of its little pools and went scrambling down its rocky course, heedless of the soaking they received in the process. They covered about a hundred yards in this way, slipping and slithering down miniature waterfalls and over crags greasy with spray, until Asmin gasped: "This'll do, won't it?"

"Hope so," grunted Hawkins. "Here's a path again, of sorts. Let's follow it down."

They continued down the mountainside, hugging the bank of the stream. The jungle got denser, darker, and steamier as they descended. Once Nicky declared that he had caught a glimpse of a wide river winding far below, which could only be the Tapti. But immediately the trees closed in again and shut out the sight.

* "We've puzzled them," said Hawkins exultantly. "I haven't heard 'em give tongue for five minutes or more."

He rejoiced too soon. Hardly were the words out of his mouth before that cruel howl echoed from the slope above them, to be answered by the eager, devilish chorus of the pack.

"They've picked us up again," said Nicky, "but we've gained a bit, anyhow."

They took to the water for the second time, emerged on the side from which they had originally crossed, and

plunged into the undergrowth. Progress was much slower now they were off the path. Spiky bushes barred their way and creepers clung like tentacles to their feet. They were soon all three tattered and bleeding.

Nicky noticed, and realized that it doubled their peril. The scratches were trivial in themselves, but there was enough blood to make the trail foolproof. He kept his eyes open for any spot where they could stand at bay.

"No good taking to the trees till we have to," said Hawkins. "These brutes will sit round till they starve us out."

"I thought you said—"

"I know—but then my pistol and powder weren't soaking wet!"

"If only we can get down to the river," Asmin put in, "we may see a village."

They wasted no more words. The only thing to do was to keep moving, and as fast as possible. They heard the doubtful whining of the dogs far behind, at the point where they had jumped into the stream the second time, but after a few minutes the note changed to a confident howl. The pack had picked up the scent once again—perhaps one should say once for all, since it was not likely they would lose it now with the fresh blood to help them.

"There's the river," yelled Nicky. "Not far now!"

But the broad green ribbon of water, now showing clearly in front, seemed completely deserted. No smoke indicated the presence of settlements along its wooded banks, and there was no sign of a boat moving on its surface.

Still, anything was better than the steamy darkness of the jungle, where there was no room to swing a sword.

If the worst came to the worst they could wade knee-deep into the water. If the dogs followed, it would be easy enough to deal with them.

But . . . would they reach the bank in time? The merciless howling was terribly close on their heels. The dogs could race through the undergrowth almost at top speed, whereas their quarry stumbled and fought with the branches which barred their passage.

"Just the thing," bellowed Hawkins over his shoulder, "an island——"

"How do we get to it? Swim?"

"No, look, there's a fallen tree lying across the channel!"

It was certainly the tiniest islet imaginable, not more than forty yards by twenty, with a stretch of dark, muddy water, uncertain in depth, cutting it off from the bank. A tree, its roots no doubt loosened by some past flood, had fallen so that its upper branches rested on the island, and it formed a natural (though unsteady) bridge.

When they reached it, the pack was almost upon them. They could hear not only the shrill barking but the rustle and crackle as thirty or forty lean dogs hurled themselves down the slope.

"Over you go, Nicky! Take Asmin's hand, to steady her! Not that you'll get any wetter if you do fall in."

Even at this critical moment Hawkins could talk as calmly as though he were arranging a pleasure-party in a boat.

Nicky and Asmin crossed without mishap. Before Hawkins was halfway over, the dogs burst from the undergrowth and streaked for the end of the tree. "Don't worry," he sang out reassuringly, "they can't come over more than one at a time."

He turned, balancing himself on the log, shifting his grip on his sword-hilt. The leader of the pack was creeping warily towards him, ears laid back, beady eyes cunning, yellow fangs bared. Hawkins wished he was wearing his high sea-boots, instead of being barefoot—the chase down the hill had long since robbed him of the native slippers he had once had. Oh, well . . . he would have to take extra care the brute didn't get to close quarters. Bare feet were probably much better for gripping the log, anyhow.

The dog sprang. The man lunged. With a howl, the beast somersaulted down into the water.

"Nearly had me over, too," Hawkins commented between his teeth.

"Oh, *do* come across!" pleaded Asmin.

He obeyed, grinning like a schoolboy. "That gave me great satisfaction. I've done enough running. I want to hit back."

"If we pushed the end of the log a bit that way," Nicky suggested, "they wouldn't be able to come over after us."

"I want 'em to come over after us, the dirty brutes!" Hawkins sent a bloodthirsty look across the narrow channel. It was accepted, apparently, as a challenge. Three large dogs came loping across the bridge, one after another. The two men gave them a warm reception, and sent them rolling into the water. Though not before one of them had beaten Hawkins' guard, and fastened its fangs in his shoulder. It was lucky that the cloth was thick and full, and that Nicky was on hand.

After that, Asmin insisted on their moving the log. As a bridge it had served its purpose for the present. She preferred it as a drawbridge.



THE DOG SPRANG. THE MAN LUNGED.



So, keeping a wary eye on the rest of their enemies, who were squatting on their haunches along the bank awaiting the next move, the two men laid down their swords and heaved at the end of the fallen tree.

"It's moving," Asmin encouraged them. "If you can only push it out a yard or two—"

But they succeeded beyond their intentions. The tree shifted suddenly, almost precipitating them into deep water. There was a tremendous splash. The tree had rolled off the land at both ends, and was slowly swinging round with the current.

"Now we've done it," said Hawkins with a great guffaw. "They can't get at us—and we can't get at them, unless we swim for it."

"Look out!" yelled Nicky, gripping his arm and lugging him backwards. A second later the jaws of a crocodile clashed together over the spot where he had been standing. "Yes, we *have* done it, as you say. Out of the frying-pan into the fire! We've marooned ourselves, and even if the dogs go away, goodness knows how *we* can."

"We'll think of something." But Hawkins' face had turned a little grey. There was something sickening about crocodiles. . . . There was a blood-flecked flurry in the green water now, just below the islet, where two of the reptiles were fighting for the carcass of a dog. The fugitives turned their eyes from the disgusting spectacle, and surveyed their domain.

"Not exactly a Prospero's island," said Nicky, forcing a smile. "Food resources—three bushes with berries which may be poisonous. Shelter—the same three bushes and two palm-trees. Plenty of water to drink, anyhow."

"Ye-es." Asmin studied the river and wrinkled her

nose. "Will, I—I suppose the crocodiles couldn't climb out, could they?"

"Oh, I don't think so," Hawkins assured her valiantly, "though I confess I've never studied the habits of the brutes."

"We'll be safe enough up at this end," Nicky said; "it's quite steep."

"Yes," Hawkins agreed. "By the look of it, this is the only bit which isn't covered when the river's in flood."

"I hope there won't be a flood in the near future! Do you think if we could fell that palm, it would reach across to the bank?"

Hawkins squinted heavenwards, and then measured the gap with his eye. "It might. But how on earth can we fell it? We've got nothing but swords and penknives."

"But we've flint and tinder. We could *burn* it down."

"Not enough wood on the island."

"No, but I'll tell you what, sir! If we dried your powder in the sun, and packed it round the stem—"

"We could blow it up! Magnificent, Nicky boy! Let's get a nice broad leaf, and spread out the powder—"

"You needn't be in so great a hurry," interrupted Asmin pathetically, "there is no sign that the dogs are yet tired of waiting for us!"

It soon began to look as though they were destined to pass the night on their perilous and uncomfortable refuge. The dogs waited, clustered on the bank, licking their chops as if in anticipation. They were hungry, but not so hungry as their quarry, who had now gone more than twenty-four hours without a proper meal.

It was getting towards sunset when Asmin roused herself from her attitude of gloomy resignation and pointed across the river.

"Will, a boat!"

Close in under the green shadows of the opposite woods moved a long dark shape. Her eyes had caught the flash of the paddles.

They all three jumped to their feet and shouted—in English, Turki, Hindustani, Portuguese—and finally just hoarse, unintelligible noises, which could not have been identified as belonging to any language. The fishing-boat kept serenely on its course . . .

"Try your pistol, Will—if the powder's dry enough!"

It took Hawkins nearly a minute, clumsy with excitement as he was, to charge his pistol. By that time, the boat was well downstream. It looked hopeless. Even if the pistol went off, even if the boatmen heard it, even if they proved more frightened than curious . . . would they ever come paddling across against the current?

Hawkins raised his arm above his head. The others held their breath.

Crack!

The sound reverberated across the water like a whip. The distant boat seemed to hesitate, as though its crew were resting and listening.

"Now shout!" croaked Hawkins. "And wave something!"

Their own native garments were well adapted to this purpose. They stood on the highest point of the islet and waved frantically. After a minute or two they dared to hope. After three minutes there was no doubt at all. The fishermen were coming over to investigate.

After that, thanks to the innate hospitality of the Indian peasant, their worries were over. They spent that night at a riverside village a couple of miles further down, and continued their journey by boat on the following day.

Two days later, gliding down the broad estuary of the Tapti, past the wharves and clustering houses of Surat, they gazed out across the grey waters of the Swally anchorage and saw, etched blackly against the evening sky, the proud masts and rigging of *The Trade's Increase*.

CHAPTER XIX

PROFIT—OR PIRACY?

"WELL, I'll be hanged!"

The plump little figure strutted across the poop to meet them. His eyes twinkled in their setting of slack, pouchy flesh. He stopped a couple of paces away, as though to survey them better, and let out a high, cackling laugh.

"William Hawkins, by all that's wonderful! In borrowed plumes, too, by the look of it—or are you dressed for a masque? And the wench—what have you been up to, you old villain?"

"This lady," said Hawkins, "is my wife. Asmin, allow me to present Sir Henry Middleton. Sir Henry, this is Mr. Nicholas Fowler, my secretary."

"Well, I'm—" Sir Henry broke off, purple with embarrassment, and then tried clumsily to make amends. "Your pardon, madam! I had no idea . . ." He swept off his hat and bowed. "Captain Hawkins came here in search of Indian riches. He has found one pearl, at least, of great price!"

"Thank you," said Asmin calmly. "I should like to wash."

"Certainly, certainly! No doubt we can find something—er—more suitable for you to wear. Boy, conductor—Mrs. Hawkins to Mr. Wicks' old cabin. Very convenient," he explained, without troubling to lower his voice; "Mr. Wicks died last week—fever—no loss really; confounded bad officer and no gentleman. You'll want

to change, too, I expect? Then you must join me in a glass of wine. And explain why you turn up on my ship like a lot of heathen scarecrows?" Sir Henry grinned as he spoke, but the smile could not counterbalance the natural offensiveness in his tone.

"I can explain that now," retorted Hawkins coldly. "We had to leave Agra in a hurry, saving our lives with the greatest difficulty, and undoing all the patient work of months—all because you were playing the fool in the Red Sea!"

"I? Really, Hawkins! You—you don't know what you're saying. Your experiences have unbalanced you. I—I refuse to listen to you in this mood. You'll feel better when you've changed into civilized clothes and had a meal."

Hawkins said no more, but, with a shrug of his shoulders, went below. Nicky followed. It was good to tread the deck of an English ship again after so many months, but their welcome to *The Trade's Increase* had been hardly an auspicious one.

That brief passage-of-arms on the poop was the fore-runner of many longer, more heated verbal battles in Sir Henry's state-room. It was one of Fortune's unkindest ironies that a man like Hawkins should have been rescued by one so completely different and unsympathetic in character. And, however equal they might rank in the service of the East India Company, there was no getting away from the fact that *The Trade's Increase* was Sir Henry's ship, and that Hawkins must either serve under him or sulk as an uninvited guest.

Sir Henry knew little of the Indies (except that they were fabulously wealthy) and nothing of the Indians (whom he described as benighted heathen, and reckoned

unworthy of consideration as fellow-beings). Any idea of learning their languages, or of treating with them on equal terms, he dismissed as lily-livered poppycock, unworthy of an Englishman. He saw himself as the typical Englishman—a sea-dog of the line of Drake and Grenville, divinely sent to maintain their swashbuckling traditions in these decadent Stuart days. He had taught the natives a lesson (he flattered himself) in the Red Sea, and he was prepared to do the same elsewhere.

"Any more insolence from this Mocrob Khan," he thundered one night at dinner, shaking the wine-glasses as he thumped the table, "and I'll sack Surat as we sacked Panama! For two pins I'll rake the whole west coast, as Drake did in America. That's the way!"

But in the sober air of morning, even Sir Henry had the sense to realize the futility of such boasting. Even the town of Surat alone would have been a hard nut to crack, and the Portuguese vessels, never far away, would have brought swift retribution. There was no scope in India, at the moment, for such heroic methods.

It was not long, indeed, before they were compelled to vacate the roadstead. There were difficulties over supplies, and the Governor refused to lift his embargo on trade with the English.

"It's no good, Sir Henry," said Hawkins as they stood out for the open sea. He shook his head regretfully, thinking of the cherished scheme which had now been finally shattered. "We'll have to concentrate on the Islands till this storm blows over. Perhaps in a few years time . . ."

"That be hanged for a tale!" Sir Henry fairly bristled. He looked (thought Nicky with a secret smile) like the villain in a piece done by the boys' company of players—

adding extra ferocity to make up for his lack of inches. "I came to India to trade, and, confound it, sir, trade I will! They *shall* do business with us, whether they like it or not."

"I don't see how you can compel them," said Nicky.

"You'll see, young man, you'll see!"

And before very long, Nicky did see.

Sir Henry gave orders to heave-to just out of sight of land. They lay there, the weather being calm, all night. Early next morning the sails of two Arab dhows showed against the sunrise, standing out from the roadstead.

"I've kept my eye on them for a few days past," cackled Sir Henry. "They've been loading pepper for Egypt. Well, that pepper's going to find its way to London!" He strutted away, telescope under his arm, and issued orders. The bare spars began to blossom with canvas. Slowly, then with increasing speed, the big vessel stole across the course of the dhows. The Arabs, apparently mistrustful, drew away to the northward.

Sir Henry rubbed his hands. "Well, a bit of a chase adds a spice of excitement, eh? Good, that—spice and pepper! Ha, ha! No harm in letting 'em have a run. Don't want Surat to hear the sound of the gun-fire——"

"Gun-fire?" Nicky exclaimed.

"Oh, only a shot across their bows, y' know, to make 'em heave-to. They won't show fight."

Nicky turned to Hawkins, who was looking far from happy. "Surely, sir, *you* haven't agreed——"

"There's no use in argument, Nicky. This is Sir Henry's command, and he must exercise it as he thinks best."

"But dash it—this is piracy!"

Middleton whipped round. "Piracy, did y' say? You

accuse me of piracy? You'd better hold your tongue, my lad, unless you want to be gagged with the iron pin!"

Nicky flushed, but stood his ground. "You're the master of this ship, Sir Henry Middleton, but I am not a member of its company. I'm here as a passenger—and a very unwilling passenger. You can keep your iron pin and your cat-o'-nine-tails for the men who were big enough fools to sign on as your crew!"

Hawkins could hardly repress a chuckle, but he straightened his face hurriedly and interposed.

"That's no way to speak to Sir Henry Middleton, Nicky. You had better apologize. At the same time, I think Sir Henry will admit that he also spoke rather hastily. Shall we consider the matter closed, gentlemen?"

"Ay." Sir Henry wheeled round. "I've got better things to do. . . . Gunner, run out one of the forecastle guns, and let 'em have a shot across their bows."

"Ay, ay, sir."

"We'll creep up to windward," went on Sir Henry, addressing Hawkins. "Take the wind out of their sails, y' know."

Nicky said no more. He walked down to the waist of the ship, unwilling to accept any longer the favour of a place on the poop. Thence he mounted the forecastle and stood in the bows, tight-lipped and disapproving, to watch the outcome of the chase.

The warning shot had its effect. The dhows hove-to. *The Trade's Increase* overhauled them rapidly, coming up close on the port side of the nearer vessel. The English ship seemed by comparison mountainous—the Arab craft was quite overshadowed, and its single lateen sail grew slack against the mast with not a capful of wind to fill it.

Its swarthy captain jumped up and poured forth a torrent of indignant Arabic.

"Explain to him, Hawkins, there's a good fellow. I can't manage the lingo. . . . What's he saying?"

"He's asking what right we have to stop him on the high seas, when he holds documents from the Great Mogul and the King of Portugal."

"Tell him I don't care that much for the pair of 'em! The King of England's the only one I serve."

To judge by Hawkins' tone, he translated this sentiment more tactfully.

"And tell him," continued Sir Henry, "to look lively with that pepper in his hold. How many hundred bags is he carrying? Let him lash his ship alongside and get it transferred. If he tries any tricks, I'll blow him out of the water!"

When Hawkins had suitably rendered this speech and listened to the voluble reply, he turned to his colleague and said: "He wants to know if we're pirates."

"Pirates?" This time it looked almost as though Sir Henry would explode with fury. "I'll give him pirates! Tell him we're honest traders, doing business the only way his fool of a Mogul will let us. For every bag of pepper he gives us we'll pay him the full equivalent in English goods."

"He says he doesn't want the English goods——"

"I can't help that!"

"He's contracted to deliver this cargo in Egypt."

"Nonsense! These heathen don't know the meaning of a contract. How can they? Can't take a Christian oath even. Tell him to waste no more time jabbering, but get the stuff transhipped. If he doesn't want to be paid for his pepper, *I* don't mind."

The captain of the dhow yielded suddenly with true Oriental resignation. The two vessels were made fast alongside, the hatches opened, and the pepper-bags carried aboard *The Trade's Increase*. In return the Arabs were given the fair equivalent (according to Sir Henry's estimate of fairness) in the goods he had brought from England. The other dhow had, in the meantime, made good her escape.

The next two or three weeks were spent in "trade" of this character—the interception of small vessels entering and leaving Surat, and the exchange of goods with them, enforced at the cannon's mouth. It was hardly surprising that, under such conditions, the prices secured were extremely favourable to the East India Company.

Nicky hated it all. To his straightforward way of thinking it was no better than piracy.

Hawkins made fun of him for his scruples. "It's not the way I like to do it myself," he admitted, "but it's been forced on us. How else can we get rid of our goods?"

"We'd do better to take them home again, rather than force them on people who don't want them."

"Take them home? Ruin our shareholders? Put ourselves and a whole lot of other seamen out of work? Injure the cloth trade at home, and the glove-makers and gunsmiths and a whole crowd of others?" Hawkins shook his head. "When you're as old as I am you'll find you can't always live up to ideals. Life's a struggle—"

"Well," Nicky interrupted impatiently, "I'd sooner struggle against the Portuguese than these helpless Arabs and Indians. That would be a *fight*, anyhow. And it's all the fault of the Portuguese really, wanting to monopolize the Indian trade."

"True enough. Oh, well, I expect you'll have your wish granted before long—all the fighting with the Portuguese that you want, and a sight *more* than Sir Henry wants, for all his brave talk."

"What do you mean?"

"They're not going to let us play this game much longer. Mark my words, the Portuguese are getting ready to attack."

But Sir Henry Middleton, who was equally well aware of this possibility, did not choose to wait until it materialized. He announced one day that the Surat trade was, for the present, finished—the traders were getting wary and avoiding the port, and it was difficult to provision the ship when Surat itself was unapproachable. He had decided, therefore, to sail for Bantam, to careen the ship (which was badly in need of it), and to complete his cargo for the homeward voyage.

His three passengers were not sorry to hear his decision. Although actually it took them some thousands of miles further from England, it brought nearer the day when they would see home and the last of Sir Henry.

But *The Trade's Increase*, and many of her company, were destined never to see England again. During the careening at Bantam the ship heeled over suddenly and slid to her grave beneath the jade-green waters of the Indian Ocean.

CHAPTER XX

IS IT WAR?

NICKY was not aboard *The Trade's Increase* when she sank. In fact, he was many hundreds of miles away.

While they were still coasting down the western side of the great peninsula, two European vessels had been sighted to starboard. After a nervous quarter of an hour, during which Sir Henry feared they might be Portuguese galleons, bent on punishment, they were identified as English. At still closer quarters the larger of the two ships proved to be the *Red Dragon* and the smaller the *Hosiander*, both under the command of Captain Thomas Best, who came aboard in due course to exchange rather frigid courtesies with Sir Henry Middleton.

"Hullo, Nicky!" A broad West Country voice hailed him across the deck.

"John!"

It was his former cabin-mate, who had come over in the boat from the *Red Dragon*. They spent a busy quarter of an hour, exchanging experiences.

"We're bound for Surat," John explained, "with orders to clear up the mess Sir Henry made over the Red Sea affair."

Nicky pulled a wry face. "You'll have a worse mess to clear up now." He described the doings of the last month or two.

John whistled. "I gather you're not too happy with Sir Henry."

"I am *not*. One of the happiest days in my life will be when I walk off his ship."

"Why not walk off it today?"

"That's an idea! What's Best like? Would he have me?"

"He'd jump at you. You know the lingo, and you know the state of things at Surat. You'd be very valuable—if you aren't afraid to show your nose in the port again!" John's eyes twinkled provocatively.

"I'm not afraid. It was none of my doing. I say—perhaps Hawkins could come too!"

But Hawkins decided to stay where he was. Though far from enamoured of Sir Henry's company and methods, he declared that he never wanted to see Surat again. There was news, too, that his old friend Captain Hippon was trading for the Company on the eastern Coromandel coast, and there was real hope of getting a concession at Masulipatam. He chose, therefore, to remain in *The Trade's Increase*, with the idea of joining Hippon if opportunity arose.

Nicky said good-bye to him, and to Asmin, with great reluctance. But it looked as though his new commander would be a worthy successor to Hawkins, and a most welcome change from Sir Henry.

Captain Tommy Best was a seaman of the old school. Without thinking about it, he contrived to be everything that Sir Henry wanted to be, and could not. His blunt speech was redeemed by the warmth of heart underlying it, and his simple faith that the English were the chosen people had none of the offensiveness which coloured Sir Henry's similar belief. He liked fighting (as Nicky was to find), but he was not truculent or boastful. He was not, like Hawkins, a cultured gentleman, with wide

interests and a knowledge of foreign languages, but he made little pretence to these things. His home was the sea. The land-world, in all its fascinating variety, he regarded only as a necessary edging to the water and a source of fresh water, provisions, and trade.

Nicky had already summed him up as they rowed back to the *Red Dragon*. Best sat, four-square, in the stern-sheets of his galley, with great stubby fingers spread on his massive thighs. Loud and genuine as had been his admiration for *The Trade's Increase*, he could not keep the look of pride and contentment out of his brown eyes as he drew nearer to his own smaller and less modern vessel.

Another pleasant surprise greeted Nicky when he mounted the ladder behind his new commander. It was the face of Timothy Wells, the bo'sun, staring down at him amazedly.

"Mr. Fowler, by all that's incredible! Is it you, midear, or your ghost? D'ye mean to say those heathen haven't murdered you after all?"

"You sound disappointed," said Nicky, laughing as he dropped over the bulwarks and seized the bo'sun's hand.

"Nay, I'm not that, midear, but I can foresee a busy time ahead of me." Timothy shook his head. "As my old dad used to say, 'Lose no opportunity, Tim my boy, to extend your knowledge o' the world around you.'"

"We'll have a yarn tonight, as ever is," Nicky assured him. "I'll tell you so much about India, and the Mogul, that your hair'll stand on end like the bristles on a scrubbing-brush."

"That's a promise, sir," said Timothy, almost as lugubriously as if it had been not a promise but a threat.

He and John Rose were not the only shipmates Nicky recognized. There were other men who had served in the *Hector* and had taken the opportunity to return to Indian waters under Tommy Best. There was quite a crowd on the forecastle that evening to hear the adventures of the two Englishmen on the mainland.

Best himself was frankly more interested in the situation at Surat. Over dinner he questioned Nicky shrewdly, with special reference to the Portuguese naval forces known to be in that quarter and to the gun-power of the fort.

"You expect fighting, sir?"

Best nodded slowly. "Ay, lad, I do." His weather-beaten face puckered into a smile. "Oh, I know I've been sent to smooth things over. Conciliation." He rolled the unaccustomed word off his tongue as though it were a wine he did not care for. "But do you think the Portuguese want conciliation?"

"I doubt if they particularly want war."

"They'd sooner have war than lose their trade to us. Oh, I know they're not exactly spoiling for a fight. If we went and apologized for Sir Henry's doings, and promised it shouldn't happen again, they'd be only too pleased. But—" He stood up, his forked beard jutting out defiantly. "That would mean we gave up hope of trading at Surat. And we can't. I was sent out to get that trade. By conciliation if possible. If not—then by cannon."

"I've no objection to fighting the Portuguese, sir. I owe them a knock or two." Nicky thought bitterly of Don Enrico. "But I hope you'll try to get the goodwill of the Indians. Sir Henry could never see that we'd get nowhere without that. We want them to respect us—we

must show them we can stand up to Portugal. But at the same time we don't want them to fear us."

"No?" queried Best abruptly. "Can't see any harm in a little wholesome fear, myself."

"If they get that feeling about us, they'll think we want to conquer their country. India seems to have had a lot of invasions. The Moguls came in with the last—and they mean it to *be* the last. If they get it into their heads we have designs on their territory—"

"But that's nonsense!"

"Not entirely, from their point of view. If, as I say, we stick to trade, and honest trade—not Sir Henry's buccaneering style of doing business!—we shall do well. Otherwise . . . well, we may blow Surat to pieces, but we'll never get regular cargoes to load, year after year. Which, I take it, is what the Company is after."

"That's it, lad." Best looked quite impressed by Nicky's exposition. "I can see Hawkins has trained you to see further than most. Shrewd old devil, Hawkins! Ought to be at court. Wasted at sea!" He sighed. "Sea's all right for plain sailors like me and your young friend Rose. We make fools of ourselves every time we step ashore."

Nicky returned to his cabin with a pleasant feeling that at last he was in a position to do something of value, independent of Hawkins who had hitherto always overshadowed him. Tommy Best needed first-hand knowledge and advice, and, to his great credit, the old sea-dog was prepared to take it where he found it. Hawkins would soon be hundreds of miles away, and only Nicky could fill the gap. He was no longer a boy, either. Five years had elapsed since that far-off April day when the *Hector* had slipped down the Thames on the ebb-tide. In

those five years the boy who had sneaked into forbidden playhouses had gradually disappeared, giving place to a man.

Five years . . . and he hadn't seen a play, heard a new song from England! It seemed like a lifetime. Will Shakespeare, they told him, had retired. Now everyone was talking of two new, brilliant writers, Beaumont and Fletcher, whose *Philaster* had been produced with great success shortly before the ships left England. As for the rest of the news . . . well, there had been no more Catholic plots, the same Parliament was still dragging out its lengthy existence (Nicky was not interested), and, with the Earl of Salisbury near the end of his life and Raleigh still in prison, the last glories of the Elizabethan age seemed to be fading.

"We're going to revive them," Nicky vowed.

John yawned. "How?"

"India."

"I don't see."

"What made Spain great? Mexico, Peru—the West Indies. Why shouldn't India do the same for England?"

John filled his pipe deliberately—he had now acquired the fashionable smoking habit. "You're a funny chap, Nicholas. You talk about me and Tommy Best as if we were the most blood-stained fire-eaters imaginable, and yet I'll wager your peaceful dreams will cost more lives in the long run than ever we take."

"That's absurd. I'm not suggesting we should act as the Spaniards did. There's no conquest in this case. Just free trade on equal terms." Nicky's eyes shone. "Our ships and men are as good as any sailing the seas—"

"Hear, hear!"

"And our merchants," continued Nicky with a rare

flash of family pride, "can turn out goods to equal any. There you are then! You've only got to add keenness and enterprise, and the trade's ours."

"I won't argue. You could talk a dog's hind-leg off. And meanwhile here we go, sailing as it were into the lion's mouth. A very peaceful prospect!"

"You said much the same when Hawkins and I set off for Agra. I like lions' mouths. I haven't been bitten yet."

Nicky voiced a boldness he was far from feeling as they drew near to Surat. Sailing into that shoalbound anchorage was rather, as John had said, like sailing into the lion's mouth. The spacious anchorage was dotted with Portuguese ships.

The Portuguese seemed to have mobilized a regular fleet to put a stop to English interference with their trade. They had four warships, one flying the flag of their admiral, and another that of a vice-admiral, and with a total gun-power of 120 pieces. As if this display were not sufficient, they had also about thirty smaller craft, rowing galleys for boarding.

"Quite a reception!" Tommy Best laughed as he swept the ominous horizon with his glass. "I don't think we'll go closer till we find the mood they're in. Not too much sea-room here, and those galleys look dirty little devils for close-quarter work. Signal the *Hosiander* to heave-to and anchor. Hullo, they're sending someone to talk to us! Stand by, Nicky, I'll need you for the lingo."

A boat was being rowed rapidly towards the *Red Dragon*, and, as it drew near, the flash of helmets and cuirasses in the stern showed that it was bringing gentlemen of some note.

"We'll talk to 'em on the poop," Best decided, "not

down below. I'd sooner see what's moving over there." He cocked a wily eye across the intervening water towards the Portuguese fleet.

The envoys were heard climbing the ladder. Nicky took his stand at the captain's elbow. As the first of the Portuguese stepped on to the poop, he let out an exclamation.

"I fancy you will not need an interpreter, sir! This is Don Enrico da Torres—who, as I have very good reason to know, has an excellent command of English!"

The little nobleman stopped abruptly, his yellow hand crossing instinctively to his sword-hilt. His eyes flashed under the steel peak of his helmet.

"I see I have no need to introduce myself," he said quietly. "Mr. Fowler I know, but you, sir, have the advantage of me."

"Thomas Best, sir, master of the *Red Dragon*, and commander of this voyage, on behalf of the English East India Company."

Don Enrico raised his slanting eyebrows—they were like ink-splashes across his parchment face. "I regret that no such organization is known to, or recognized by, His Most Catholic Majesty. But let that pass . . . I have the honour, Captain Best, to bear you a message from the Admiral."

"I shall be interested to hear it."

"He requests you to quit this anchorage immediately."

"Will you tell him—with my compliments—that I'm very sorry but I can't? I've business with the port, and I also want to reprovision my ships."

"Captain Best, there can be no business for an English ship in this port. Any attempt on your part to enter Surat will be taken as an unfriendly act."

The Englishman spread his feet apart and looked down at Don Enrico. "And any attempt to *prevent* me will be taken as an act of war!"

Don Enrico laughed softly. "That would be extremely foolish, senhor. There is peace between our kings—and I do not fancy that your James wishes that peace to be broken."

"It mayn't rest with him! It's what the merchants of London say, when their lawful trade is interfered with!"

"In any case"—Don Enrico waved a pallid hand airily in the direction of the fleet—"you would find it difficult to disobey."

"*Disobey!*" snorted Best.

"I believe that suicide is still regarded as a sin, even according to the Protestant heresy."

"Tisn't suicide I'm afraid of committing, but murder!"

Don Enrico took a pair of gloves from his belt and drew them very slowly and deliberately on to his thin fingers. "Then, senhor, I think it is time to speak quite plainly."

"Nothing I'd like better! Fire away."

"The Admiral gives you an hour to hoist anchor and leave the roadstead. If by the end of that time you are not going, it will be our regrettable duty to blow you out of the water!"

"Is it war, then?"

"Yes, since you compel us, it is war."

CHAPTER XXI

THE GUNS OPEN

BEST watched the retreating boat, then glanced at Nicky with a broad grin. "It wants barely a couple of hours to sundown," he said. "They fancy they can settle us quickly, but maybe they'll have a surprise." He handed his telescope to John and demanded abruptly: "What d'ye make of it, lad? What's our best tactic?"

Rose studied the Portuguese fleet. "We'll have to keep those small galleys away, sir. Too many of them. If we let 'em run close in and board, we'll have no more chance than a stag with the hounds on him."

"True enough. There's thirty or so of those craft, and I don't know how many men in each. We'll not stand a chance if it comes to cold steel."

"Shouldn't we run for the open sea, sir, where there's room to manœuvre?"

Best shook his head emphatically. "We can't leave the roadstead. Hang it, lad, that's what they *told* us to do! Nay, we've sea-room enough within the anchorage. Now, look at the Admiral's ship. And that one near it, the Vice-Admiral's. Anything strike you?"

John Rose hesitated. Then he said doubtfully: "They seem separated rather from the rest of their fleet—isolated."

"Exactly. Can you see why?"

"Some shoals in between, by the look of it, making a gap in their formation."

Best slapped his shoulder exuberantly. "Just so, slow-wit! And d'ye realize that with the tide running as it is, they must *stay* isolated? They can't join their consorts and they can't get any help from them—I doubt if any gun would carry that distance. We have 'em on toast, my lads. We're going to talk to the Admirals *now*—and in a lingo even they can understand! Signal the *Hosiander* to up-anchor and follow us. Clear for action, but not a shot till I give the signal. Off with you!"

There had so far been no visible movement on board the Portuguese vessels—indeed, the returning envoys were at that moment only just mounting their ship's side to report their failure. But aboard the two English ships there was swift, purposeful activity.

The drum beat to quarters. The long anchor-chains came up, fathom by fathom, wet and glistening. The gun-crews gathered round their guns. The musketeers paraded with their long matches burning—"Though it'll be all up with us if we need ye," Best assured them jovially.

To the utter amazement of the Portuguese, the *Red Dragon* began to glide through the water—straight for their two largest vessels.

Now it was their turn to prepare. Clear across the intervening sea came the dry rattle of drumsticks, the shrill peal of trumpets, and even, as the *Red Dragon* drew nearer, the voluble chatter of agitated men.

"Splendid!" Tommy Best looked really happy as he strode his poop. "Blow us out of the water indeed! We'll show 'em." He swung round on his heel and stared astern. His bearded jaw dropped comically. "What on earth's happened to the *Hosiander*? Why aren't they following?"

"It looks to me, sir," said Nicky, "as if they'd fouled their anchors, and couldn't get clear."

"Lubbers! Incompetent nincompoops!"

"Shall we heave-to, and wait, sir?" one of the officers suggested.

"Can't wait! Time and tide wait for no man. Have to do the job alone, that's all. Nothing to worry about."

The *Red Dragon* sailed on alone, steering for the open water between the two Portuguese ships.

There was something unearthly about her silent, un-hurried approach. Even when the Portuguese guns opened, she fired not a shot in reply.

"Why waste shot?" Best looked contemptuously at the little fountains of water spurting far ahead of them. "We'll need every round before this is over. And it'll be useful to remember—they were the first to open fire."

Even when the range shortened, the standard of Portuguese gunnery was not high. A cannon-ball or two whistled through the *Red Dragon*'s rigging or ricocheted from the sea and bumped her sides, but there were no casualties.

The gunners looked appealingly towards the poop. It is not pleasant to be fired at, even unsuccessfully, and make no retort. But the captain shook his head, and still the ship glided on in silence.

They were now nosing their way into the strip of clear water between the two Portuguese galleons. To an inexperienced eye it looked as though they were running their heads into a noose—allowing themselves to be sandwiched between two powerful adversaries. But Tommy Best knew very well what he was doing.

His eye grew brighter. He gripped the rail, his forked beard jutting aggressively, and sent a quick glance to port

and starboard, measuring the distances with his eye. Then, with a smile of satisfaction, he nodded to the master-gunner. The man's voice pealed loud and clear against the dull background of Portuguese cannon, and the distant crackle of useless musketry.

"Fire!"

A score of brown hands laid matches to as many touch-holes. The shots blended in one long, echoing explosion. The deck shook with the recoil—indeed, the entire vessel quivered from stem to stern, and rolled over sickeningly, to right herself a moment or two later. Dense clouds of yellow, stinging smoke drifted across the bulwarks, blotting the enemy from view.

High on the poop, Nicky could see the havoc wrought by the double broadside. Several direct hits had been scored on both of the Portuguese vessels. Spars had come rattling down in a tangle of torn rigging. The bulwarks were badly scarred, and the forecastle of the Vice-Admiral's ship was a ruin.

"Keep it low," bellowed Tommy Best.

"Ay, ay, sir!" cried the master-gunner. "Aim a bit lower, lads. 'Tween wind and water, that's how we want it."

The gun-crews were working feverishly to reload. The *Red Dragon* was now stationary, except for an almost imperceptible drift, due to the tide. The sun was already very low in the west, a dazzling red disc poised above the long sand-bar. The light was confusing for the gunners on the port-side, and soon there would be no light at all.

"Independent fire," Best ordered. "Fast as you can reload and aim."

"Ay, ay, sir!"

The guns began to fire singly, at short intervals, as

though the ship were a spiteful woman, hurling insults as they came into her head.

Nor were the Portuguese by any means silent. Their effective gun-power was about equal to that of the English (since one of them could bring only her port battery into action, and the other only her starboard), and although in general their standard of marksmanship was inferior, they had one or two men who could lay a gun as well as any.

There was one in particular, aboard the Admiral's flagship. Nicky learnt to watch (and with some trepidation) for that puff of smoke, coming from just aft of the Portuguese forecastle, which indicated that he had fired again. It was one of his shots which struck the *Red Dragon's* mainmast, though luckily without bringing it down. Another hit the empty longboat, which was trailing astern by its painter, and smashed it like an egg-shell.

"That man's a nuisance, sir," said Nicky, not without a vague idea at the back of his mind that this dangerous gunner might soon try a shot at the poop on which he himself was standing.

"Oh, is it the same fellow? Have you spotted him?"

"Yes, sir, he's firing from just aft of their forecastle."

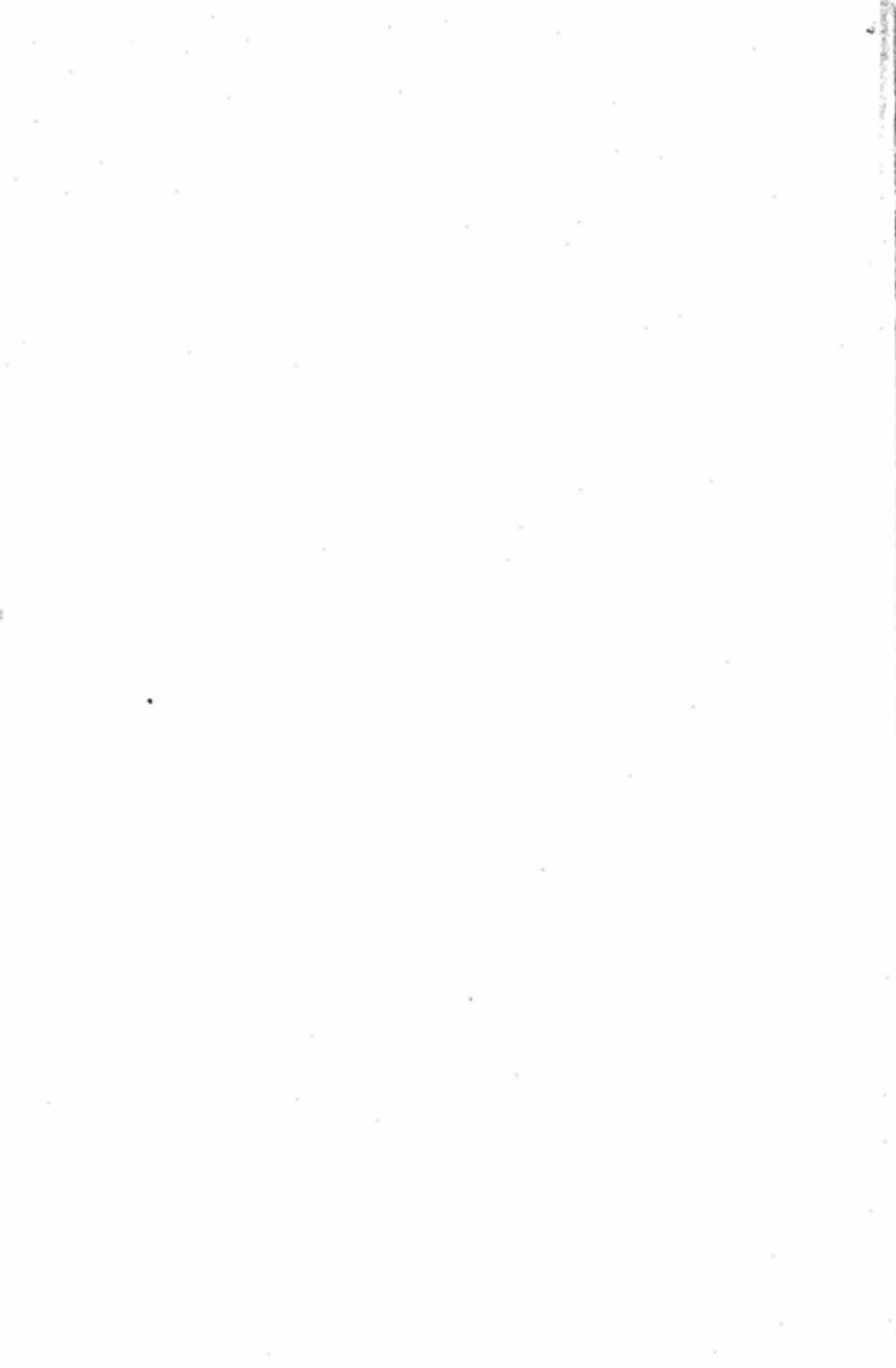
"I see. Then will you have the goodness to step down and tell the master-gunner? Explain where this fellow is, and request him to"—Best hesitated, his polite vocabulary deserting him, and smiled—"to lay a gun himself and blow him to blazes!"

"Ay, ay, sir."

Nicky ran down the ladder, not sorry to have an excuse to leave the poop for a few moments—it was positively draughty with the whistle of shot overhead—and glad, too, to have something definite to do. He delivered



THE GUNS BEGAN TO FIRE SINGLY.



the message to the master-gunner, and pointed out the whereabouts of the enemy who was doing all the damage.

"We'll do our best, anyhow." The man selected a gun which was known for its reliability, and squinted along the barrel. To Nicky, standing impatiently at his elbow, it seemed ages. Surely, at any moment now, the deadly Portuguese would fire another shot. . . .

"I think that'll do," said the master-gunner, straightening himself. He had the quiet, methodical, confident air of a gardener or a carpenter who has just done a familiar task as well as he knows how to do it. "Stand back a bit for the recoil." He took the lighted taper which was handed him and laid it to the touch-hole. . . .

Best was shouting from the poop before the smoke had cleared. "Not quite, my lad! You've chipped her forecastle but—"'

Crash!

The rest of his remark was lost in the splintering of timber and the thud of falling spars. For a moment or two the captain disappeared completely, then he became visible again, rising to his feet from a tangle of rigging.

"There he goes again!" he thundered. "There's only one man among 'em who can shoot like that. Can't you quieten him anyhow?"

"Ay, ay, sir, I'll get him this time!"

The master-gunner glanced round and selected another gun which had just been reloaded. He called out, with a voice which pierced even that din: "Cease fire until ye've heard this gun! I want a steady platform!"

The firing ceased obediently. The *Red Dragon's* violent rocking ceased, and the vessel lay almost motionless on the water. The master-gunner laid his gun and fired. Then, like impatient hounds, half a dozen other guns

gave tongue, and the din and vibration seemed even worse than before.

"Good shooting!" Best's lips moved, though no one else, in all probability, could hear his words. Nicky rejoined him on the poop, where normal conversation was possible again.

"Do you think he hit him, sir?"

"He smashed a mighty big hole in the ship, just in the right spot, anyhow. I'll swear he got the gun—I don't know about the gunner."

It soon looked as though the marksman himself had been killed or rendered *hors de combat*. At all events, there were no more direct hits registered on the English ship, although that might also have been due to the failing light.

The sun sank with tropical swiftness below the rim of the western sea. Over the hills, inland, rose a great moon, and, as the green sky changed rapidly to a darker, bluer shade, the stars came out in clusters.

"That'll do for tonight," said Best comfortably. "We'll just anchor out of gunshot, and hammer 'em again in the morning—if they haven't gone."

"I suppose they won't attempt anything under cover of dark?"

"Dark won't be much cover tonight." Best jerked his thumb at the moon, which was beginning to flood the bay with vivid light. "Though if *I* were in command yonder, I'd see if I couldn't play some tricks with all those rowing galleys. I don't fancy *they* will. But the watch will have to keep their eyes open, just in case."

John Rose came up at that moment. "No serious casualties, sir. Three men slightly wounded. That's all."

The old seadog's leathery face became kindly. "Good.

See the lads are made comfortable. I'll come down and have a word with 'em in a minute."

Later that night Nicky entered his state-room to find him writing up the log, breathing rather loudly with the unusual effort of literary composition. There was a seraphic smile on his face—such a smile as a man might wear when writing to his beloved. Nicky peeped over his shoulder and read (with some difficulty, due to unorthodox handwriting and spelling):

" . . . within an hour we had well peppered them with some fifty-six great shot . . . "

CHAPTER XXII

PERIL BY FIRE

THE moon sank, the stars paled. A chilling breeze, like a whisper of death, ruffled the dark waters of the bay. It was that notoriously dark hour before the dawn, when surprise attacks are most often attempted and most often succeed in catching sleepy sentries off their guard.

Nicky was on deck, yarning with Timothy. It was no part of his duty to share the watch, but he had found it impossible to sleep in the stuffy cabin. His head still ached and sang with the unaccustomed din of gunfire, and the prospect of another exciting day was not conducive to sleep.

After a little while Captain Best joined them. He was fully dressed, or, as he preferred to term it, cleared for action. He stood by the bulwarks, straining his eyes into the gloom.

"Hang it, they've not gone, have they?"

"Nay, sir." The bo'sun joined him. "They've changed their anchorage, that's all."

"Ah, I see them now. They didn't mean to be caught separated a second time." He laughed. It tickled his fancy that the Portuguese should huddle together like a flock of sheep cowering from a couple of wolves. "H'm." He considered the new situation, stroking his beard in silence for several moments. "What d'ye make of it, Timothy? As I remember the anchorage by daylight, there's plenty of deep water between us and them."

"Ay, sir, that's right, sure enough."

"But there were some sand-banks behind 'em, and on their port-side, that'd be covered at high water?"

"Ay, sir, now ye speak of it."

Nicky confirmed the fact. Though he had never yet learnt to study an anchorage with a true seaman's eye, he knew the Swally roadstead well enough for such details to be clearly imprinted on his memory.

"I see," said Best slowly, "then with this breeze, and the tide as it will be in an hour . . . yes, I think we might try it." He made no offer to explain himself in greater detail, but continued in a brisker tone: "Timothy, I'm going for them at the crack of dawn. I want the ship cleared for action now. But without a sound or a light. Understand? No drum, and no talking. If any man speaks above a whisper, I'll flay him alive."

"Ay, ay, sir. Any orders for the *Hosiander*?"

Best considered again. "I don't want 'em giving the game away."

"I could flash a lantern from the stern, sir. 'T wouldn't be seen by the Portuguese."

"No, but they might start flashing lanterns back. No. We must leave 'em to follow on afterwards—and let's hope they'll be able to clear their anchors this time!" he concluded with a malicious chuckle.

Nicky slipped away to rouse John Rose. Already, barefoot sailors were stepping like cats about the dim grey vessel, unrolling the boarding-nets and carrying out all the other preparations for battle.

John rolled over in his bunk and groaned. "What—time to—*what* do you say? Clear for action?" He sat up and threw his long legs over the side. "Our Tommy's a glutton for fighting, isn't he? I wonder what he's got up his sleeve now. Any signs of *them* stirring?"

"Not a sign."

"Then I think Tommy Best might give us time for a bite of breakfast. However . . . tell him I'll be up in a minute, soon as I've got my breeches on."

Nicky returned to the deck, munching a biscuit. One couldn't safely prophesy how long it would be before the cooks had leisure to serve another meal. It no longer worried him that either the cooks or even he himself might not then be alive. But he felt very strongly that it was better not to face cannon-balls on an empty stomach.

And suppose the rowing galleys could no longer be kept at a distance? It would come to boarding them, and desperate hand-to-hand work, with every ounce of strength needed.

Dawn was breaking. The mountains behind Surat stood out blackly against an eastern sky which every minute was growing brighter. The Portuguese fleet stood anchored against the horizon, black and distinct, every mast and spar throwing its crinkled reflection in the dove-grey water.

Like a prisoner escaping from his fetters, taking infinite care to avoid the slightest sound, the *Red Dragon* weighed anchor, spread her canvas, and began to glide through the water on the gentle dawn-breeze.

If the Portuguese had been surprised by the vigorous onslaught of the previous evening, this new attack threw them into something closely resembling panic. Trumpets shrilled and drums beat almost incessantly, as though the call to arms had to be sounded repeatedly to bring the men from their hammocks. None of the galleons had time to weigh anchor and manoeuvre for position before the *Red Dragon* was sailing down the line, treating each of them to a broadside from her starboard battery.

In the next hour or two Nicky was treated to such a display of seamanship as he was never again to see equalled in his lifetime.

The *Hosiander*, as though to make amends for her ignoble behaviour the evening before, sailed up to the support of her consort in record time, and between them the two English vessels raked the Portuguese flotilla unmercifully.

But, good as their gunnery was, it was their navigation which delighted Nicky.

Tacking hither and thither, the two ships outsailed and outmanœuvred their adversaries at every point. They delivered their broadsides with the deadly, contemptuous exactitude of a skilled fencer who touches a novice just when and where he pleases. Every attempt on the part of the Portuguese to get clear of the sand-banks was cunningly frustrated. They were kept penned into that narrow space, with no sea-room for manœuvre—just as in chess, thought Nicky, two rooks might hold double their number of other pieces captive at one end of the board.

Even to him, landsman as he still considered himself by comparison with the others, Captain Best's tactics were now plain.

The tide was on the ebb, and the Portuguese galleons were in perilously shallow water. If they stayed where they were, they might soon be aground.

And stay they had to. There was no choice.

Very soon it was obvious that the Vice-Admiral's ship was stranded. A loud cheer from the *Hosiander* signalled the good news to those aboard the *Red Dragon*.

A few minutes later a second galleon ran ashore. Its bows were fast in the sand. Not all the efforts of its crew could do more than make the stern swing ever so slightly

in the deeper water. Soon even that movement was impossible.

The two English ships concentrated on the enemy who were still afloat. But the Portuguese Admiral was too clever for them and contrived to slip away to a safe distance, whence he bombarded them with shot which mostly fell short. The fourth galleon, hard pressed by English on both sides, ran her nose into the sand and lay helpless.

It was (from the English point of view) an almost ideal situation.

The three stranded vessels could bring only about a quarter of their guns into play. Their adversaries were free to approach from any angle, deliver a shattering broadside from the port battery, swing round, and follow it with a salvo from the starboard guns. At the end of half an hour of this treatment, all three galleons looked very much the worse for wear.

But the tide was still going out, and Tommy Best had no fancy to be caught in his own trap. Also, it was nine o'clock of the morning, and he felt more than ready to break his fast. Accordingly he signalled his consort and they both stood off into deep water, out of range, and cast anchor.

"Give the guns a chance to cool," he said jovially. "That was a pounding, eh? Come on, my lads, we've earned something to eat."

They got it. In miraculously quick time, the cook produced a meal for the officers of pork, beef, and chicken, followed by Cheshire cheese and washed down with Rhenish and Canary wines and beer. Best ate and drank enormously, then stood up as eagerly as a schoolboy anxious to go off and play.

"Now let's see what's happening."

The tide had turned during the meal, and was running strongly into the estuary. Best surveyed the situation.

"It'll be afternoon before we can have another knock at them. Pity! But I've no desire to run aground myself, and have a lot of cut-throats in galleys buzzing round me like flies on a carcass. You young fellows look sleepy!"

"It's the breakfast, sir," Nicky explained apologetically.

"Go and sleep it off, then. Timothy, I want you. We've got to do something about this mainmast . . . And they've torn our rigging a bit . . . Get some men, and set 'em to . . ." Tommy Best hustled away, intent on supervising every detail in person.

Nicky looked at John and yawned. "What energy!"

"That *was* a meal, wasn't it?"

"And I didn't sleep much last night, and it *is* getting very hot."

Without another word they both went below, rolled into their bunks, and slept till afternoon.

When they reappeared on deck there had been a slight change in the situation. The Vice-Admiral was afloat again, and a host of small galleys was clustered round the other two ships on the sand-bank.

"Towing them off, midear," explained the bo'sun, "and the captain's itching to sail in and pepper 'em, but doesn't dare to. Tricky waters, these! We don't want to pile ourselves up on a shoal."

Fortunately, Best did not need to restrain his impatience very much longer. The flow of the tide soon rendered it safe to approach the enemy again, and towards the middle of the afternoon the ding-dong battle was resumed.

By this time, however, all the Portuguese galleons had been refloated, and they were too wary to be lured into a similar trap again. They had the help, too, of the smaller

craft, who now entered the combat for the first time, but luckily without sufficient effect to turn the scale.

They made one attempt, it is true, to encircle the *Hosiander* and come to painfully close quarters, but the fine gunnery of the English was too much for them. When several galleys had been sunk by direct hits amidships, and their crews scattered in the treacherous waters of the roadstead, their courage was cooled. Thereafter they lurked behind the galleons, ready to dash out if opportunity arose. It never did.

The battle went on until, as had happened on the previous day, darkness put an end to it. The Portuguese, mindful of their former unpleasant experiences, withdrew to the far end of the roadstead, nearly six miles away, leaving the English to anchor in the river-mouth itself, proud holders of the field.

Once more the casualties aboard the *Red Dragon* were quite negligible.

"You know," Nicky confided to John, "I can't think of this as real war—it's much more like a game. Here we are: we've fought hammer and tongs for a day and a half, and exchanged hundreds of shots, and at the end of it all we've only received about two black eyes and a thick ear!"

"That's because the Dons can't shoot straight—and Tommy's a mighty fine seaman. They'd tell you a different story aboard the galleons, I know."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes. While we were asleep, Timothy says they were burying their dead—lowering 'em off the deep-water end of the ships. Not very nice, but they couldn't very well keep 'em on board! Timothy says there must have been dozens. He could hear the priests' chanting, quite plainly."

Nicky went ashore that night with a water-party. He was anxious to get the feel of native opinion in the town.

He found it divided. There were some who welcomed the English seamen, and were openly exultant at the discomfiture of the Portuguese. Others were more chilly—not because they were sorry to see the Portuguese worsted, but because they feared that the English success could not possibly last. Another cause for concern in the town was that a large body of the Mogul's troops had recently arrived to deal with a pirates' stronghold on the coast nearby. They had been hoping that the Portuguese fleet would co-operate from the seaward side in attacking this stronghold, but it was beginning to look as if the Portuguese would have little appetite for further fighting, when once they had finished with the English.

An idea was born in Nicky's brain, which he resolved to impart to his captain only if circumstances should make it practicable.

He returned to the *Red Dragon* a little before nine, and lingered on deck for a few minutes' chat with the bo'sun before turning in.

It was dark tonight. Cloud-masses had drifted over from the mountains, obscuring the face of the moon.

"Any chance of a storm, bo'sun?"

"Nay, nay, midear. Those clouds don't mean anything. The dawn-breeze'll shift 'em soon enough, and we'll have another scorchin' day to fight in—if the Dons come back for any more."

"They'll come back all right," said Nicky confidently.

"H'm." Timothy ejected a stream of tobacco-juice over the side. In spite of all John Rose's requests, he still preferred to chew his tobacco instead of smoking it. "They've had a mighty severe hammering," he observed.

"But they're persistent." Nicky was thinking of Don Enrico, still presumably aboard the Admiral's galleon. He knew Don Enrico's character. "They're fighting for a big stake, you know. Already there'll be messengers well on the road to the Mogul, to tell him about yesterday's battle and today's. The Dons just can't afford to look small."

"They've not much choice. And why not?" Timothy demanded rhetorically. "'Cos we can out-sail 'em and out-shoot 'em—ay, and still could, if there were twice as many of 'em."

"Ye-es. But—" Nicky hesitated. He gazed across the water towards where, too far distant for even the brightest lantern to twinkle across the dark water, the Portuguese fleet had anchored at sunset. "There's a man aboard one of those ships. . . . I met him in Agra. . . . And it wasn't a very pleasant meeting. . . . The sort of man who tries every trick before he'll admit himself beaten." He stroked his beginnings of a beard and looked thoughtful. "I'd like to know what's in Don Enrico's mind at this very moment. I'd lay a bet he's plotting some queer way of getting at us."

"And what manner of man might this Don Enrico be?" Timothy started to ask. Then his tone changed, and his next question came in a tense, husky whisper:

"Did ye hear anything, midear?"

"Only the water—"

"Ay, but why has the water suddenly started to make that particular noise?"

"Is it oars splashing?"

Timothy listened intently. "Nay, 'tisn't oars. But it's some craft moving up the estuary."

"The galleys!"

"They couldn't come so quietly, not so many of 'em. And it's not oars. It's a sailing craft. Can ye see nothing?"

Nicky stared into the darkness. After a moment or two he gripped Timothy's arm and pointed. There was an unmistakably darker patch against the night.

"Ay, it's a ship," said the bo'sun hoarsely, "and never a light is she showing! I'd best go and tell the captain."

He hurried away. Nicky watched, fascinated, as the vague black shape loomed nearer and nearer.

Suddenly a light appeared aboard the oncoming vessel—then another, and another, not steady yellow-twinkling lanterns, but red, dancing tongues of flame, trailing sparks. They darted hither and thither, dipping out of sight for a moment or two, then flaring skywards again. It was uncanny—almost as though some unearthly band of witches had chosen the deck of a derelict vessel for their revels.

And now a bigger flame sprang up. Fire sprang from the forecastle, from the poop, from the waist. A red glow lit up the whole ship and the surrounding sea. Nicky could see men, naked to the belt and glistening. He saw them rush to the bulwarks against the background of crimson glare. Then he heard the splash of hurried, panic-driven oars, and saw a crowded boat dart from the doomed vessel's side and vanish into the night.

"Great guns!" bellowed a voice behind him. "They've sent a fire-ship against us!"

CHAPTER XXIII

A HORNET'S NEST

It was Tommy Best, his round face pale and puffy with sleep—badly needed sleep, from which he had been roused almost as soon as he had begun to enjoy it. He blinked comically in the flickering light and let out a string of picturesque words.

“They’ll foul us in another minute, sir! Shall we slip our cables?”

“No, ye fool!” Best pulled himself together. “We haven’t time to move.” That was true enough—the fire-ship was coming on with every stitch of canvas spread and bellying with the wind, whereas the *Red Dragon’s* sails were furled.

“Man the guns!” he roared. “Any of you—doesn’t matter, it’s point-blank range! Point the muzzles as low as they’ll go. Aim at the water-line. Wait till I give the word. Yes, ye fool, of course they’re ready loaded! Now, lads——”

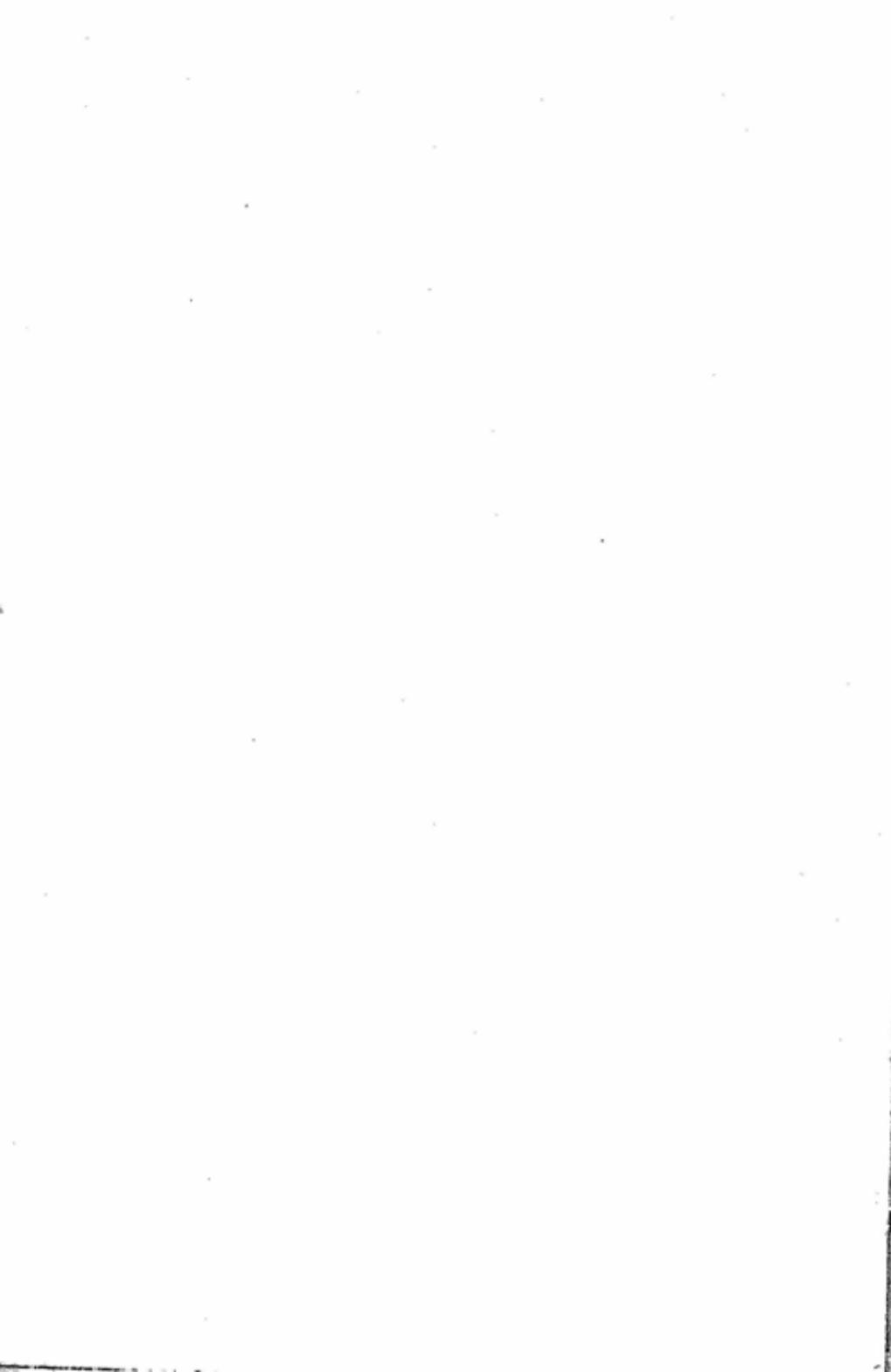
Nicky gripped his burning taper. The fire-ship was perilously near. Already the heat was terrific, and he had to shield his eyes from the glare. Men were picking up long pikes, with the idea of fending off the blazing vessel. A lot of use that was! If the fire-ship got within pike-length the heat would send them scuttling across to the starboard bulwarks!

“Fire!”

Best’s cry was almost a scream. The amateur gunners set their matches to the touch-holes. Raggedly the broad-



THE FIRE-SHIP WAS PERILOUSLY NEAR.



side crashed out upon the night air. Ere the echoes faded and the smoke cleared, Best was cursing them to reload and not waste time.

The broadside had taken good effect. The fire-ship had stopped, staggered, like a person who receives a sudden slap in the face. She was holed in several places along the water-line. She was filling. Soon she would sink—but would it be soon enough?

She sailed on with an awful majesty, the majesty of a queen whose death is upon her, yet who still keeps the semblance of life. More slowly now, because of the water gurgling into her hold, yet somehow inexorably, she crept nearer and nearer to the English vessels. Her hull blazed from stem to stern, but the masts still stood, flaunting the great sails which the glow had dyed pink, like giant rose petals.

By the time they had reloaded she was so near that the guns could not be depressed sufficiently to rake her water-line. It was almost unbearable to man the guns on the port-side at all.

Nicky knew there was little point in firing into the middle of that blazing hull. It would not affect the result one way or another. But if only one could be sure of hitting a mast . . .

He looked round desperately, hoping to shift the responsibility to one of the regular gunners. He could not see any except those who had already taken over their guns.

"Fire the thing yourself!" shouted someone roughly.

He dashed the streaming perspiration from his eyes, squinted along the barrel into that blinding inferno of red and yellow flame, stood back again, and fired the gun.

Crash!

Through the fading echoes of his own and other guns, through the fierce crackle of flames, he heard the sound of the mainmast, falling, falling, dragging its weight of rope and canvas into the heart of the fire. For a few moments, as the sails rolled across the deck, there was a new patch of darkness. Only the two ends of the fire-ship flared to heaven like twin torches. Then, as the canvas caught, there was a rush of smoke, and the flames leapt higher than ever.

But the vessel's progress had slowed till she was almost stationary. It was touch and go, now, with time on the side of the English. The wind was still pressing the fire-ship against them, but the ebb-tide and the river were drifting her away. With the mainmast down, it looked as though tide and current might win.

By now the *Hosiander* was adding her fire to that of her consort. Shot poured into the Portuguese ship from two angles. Soon she was mastless and holed like a sieve. The miracle was that she still floated at all.

But float she did, and for a remarkably long time. They watched her with a kind of sporting interest, when once all danger was passed—watched her lose the battle with the tide and drift slowly, slowly out of the estuary into the broad bay. The heat receded and the night air struck chill by contrast. The glare faded and eyes readjusted themselves to the pale flickering gloom. Yet still the fire-ship blazed till she was only a thin line of flame upon the water, far out in the roadstead. They saw her charred timbers, still somehow afloat and holding together, when daylight came.

The Portuguese made no attempt to renew the battle next day, and the English, if truth be told, were not sorry to rest at anchor in the river-mouth. Gifts and polite

greetings were exchanged with Mocrob Khan, but it was clear that, although the English were for the moment in possession of the entrance to his port, the great question of supremacy, Portuguese or English, had still to be decided.

"We've got to smash those Dons," said Best. "Drive 'em off the sea. I always said it'd come to this."

But it was easier said than done, with two ships against so many. It looked as though the position might end in stalemate.

On the next day Best tried new tactics. He left the shelter of the roadstead and sailed along the coast, hoping to lure the Portuguese into the open sea, where their rowed galleys in particular would find themselves at a serious disadvantage.

"We'll make rings round 'em," he promised his officers cheerily.

But the Portuguese sensibly refused the invitation. Best coasted along patiently for twenty miles, but the enemy did not show up even as the faintest speck on the horizon. It looked as if, for the present, they had had enough.

Towards evening, when they were beginning to consider the question of anchorage for the night, they were startled by the distant sound of gun-fire.

"Now what's afoot?" rumbled Best. He scanned the sea more eagerly than anxiously. Was there another fight on, and he not in it? If so . . .

"It's from the land, sir," said John. "If you listen carefully, there's an echo from the hills beyond."

"You're right, lad. But who in the name of goodness can it be?"

"Are we anywhere in the neighbourhood of Moha?" Nicky inquired.

"Moha? Ay." Best swung round and stared. "D'ye know the place? I reckon we're just south of the Bay of Moha. In fact, I thought we might anchor there for the night."

"It'll be a warm spot, sir—though I don't expect you'll mind that," answered Nicky, with a grin.

"Warm spot? What d'ye mean?"

"For the past year or more it's been a notorious pirates' nest."

"Oho! That might explain the firing."

"I think it does, sir. When I was in Surat, the night before last, I heard that the Mogul had sent a column to clean up the place. I expect the siege has started, and those are their cannon we hear."

"Just a little dog-fight ashore?" Best sounded disappointed.

"Not quite, sir. The pirates occupy a fort. It can be attacked from the sea—or rather it *could*, if the Mogul had any warships. Actually, till we came along, they were hoping for the co-operation of the Portuguese Admiral. But it *did* occur to me . . ."

Nicky paused significantly, and watched the slow smile of comprehension spread over the captain's ruddy face.

"It occurred to you *we* might lend a helping hand instead, eh?"

"Well, yes, sir, as a matter of fact it did."

Best sighed. "I'd dearly love to. But, lad, I've got to remember I'm a merchant-captain, not a blessed High Admiral. The Company don't mind my having a bit of a scrap if it's strictly in the interests of business . . . but how am I to explain this to the shareholders? They'd up and say we had no call to go chasing the Mogul's pirates for him, so long as we weren't attacked by them." By

this time his smile had faded completely, and he looked quite disconsolate.

"I don't think the Company would object," Nicky reassured him. "After all, the extermination of pirates is in the common interest of all honest traders."

"True. But—"

"And in this case it's of vital importance to win the Mogul's favour. Don't you see, sir? If we do this job instead of leaving it to the Portuguese, it will make a wonderful impression on the Mogul! He may give us a concession as a reward."

The captain's hesitation vanished. "I hope ye're right, lad! And even if it doesn't turn out so, it's a fair gamble." He laughed deeply. "I can write in my report that I acted on the best expert advice of one thoroughly acquainted with the conditions of the country—"

"To wit, Nicholas Fowler, Esquire," concluded John, "of the City of London, noted voyager and traveller by land!"

So it was decided. They rounded the next headland cautiously, and sailed into Moha Bay. Immediately the sound of firing broke more loudly on their ears, and it was mingled now with the crackle of musketry and the shouting of men in combat.

The situation was plain. They took it in at a glance.

Another headland bounded the bay on its northern side—a rocky, reddish promontory, sinking to a low and narrow isthmus, which was its sole link with the wooded mountain-slope of the mainland. This promontory was crowned by a cluster of low, oblong buildings, yellowish-white in colour. Terraced paths ran down its precipitous sides to the water's edge, where the rocks formed a miniature cove.

The Mogul's soldiers were attacking across the sandy isthmus. Their cannon could be seen spurting smoke from the fringe of the jungle.

Opposing them, the pirates had erected a breastwork of rocks across the narrowest part of the isthmus, from behind which they were blazing away at their assailants. To help them in their defence, two long, evil-looking galleys lay close inshore, peppering the troops with their small brass cannon.

"A very nasty position to attack," commented Best.

"Without ships," Nicky murmured.

"Precisely." Best looked at the sky. The sun was getting low. "Too late for anything tonight," he decided, "and there's no harm in letting the Mogul's men get a good idea of what they're up against. Help's all the more appreciated if it isn't offered too soon! However, I fancy we'll make a trip ashore after supper, and have a word with their general."

The *Red Dragon* and the *Hosiander* anchored where they were, safely removed from the battle which was still raging on the other side of the bay. As darkness fell, the firing slackened. The pirate galleys moved like sinister shadows to their moorings in the cove. Camp-fires began to twinkle along the shore. Soon there was silence.

Captain Best supped leisurely. Then, taking Nicky as interpreter, and half a dozen pikemen as escort, he ordered out a boat and was rowed towards the spot where the camp-fires were most thickly clustered.

Ten minutes later they were bowed into the silken tent of the Indian commander. He rose to greet them, a grave, middle-aged soldier whom Nicky remembered slightly from Agra. He had a good reputation for fidelity. He

was no Mocrob Khan. He had always preserved an impartial attitude to both the English and the Portuguese. He was concerned only with serving the best interests of his imperial master.

"Tell him," said Best, "that we've a mind to take a hand in this little affair, and help settle those scallywags on the hill yonder."

"Your Excellency," translated Nicky, "I am instructed by my commander to make a suggestion for your esteemed consideration. Our king, His Majesty James the First of England and Scotland, feels nothing but friendship for your imperial master, the Great Mogul. His ships, guns, and men have orders to assist wherever and however possible. If, therefore, you will accept our slight assistance on this occasion in reducing this pirate fortress, we shall be most happy to afford it. No man doubts for a moment," he added with an extravagant flourish, "that, even without such slight assistance as we may render, Your Excellency would speedily subdue the enemy by your own notable valour and generalship. But if there is anything we can do which may shorten the siege and reduce the loss of life among Your Excellency's gallant troops . . ." He bowed.

The general replied that the valour of the English on the sea must by now be almost the sole topic of conversation from Arabia to Japan; that he personally would be honoured to have their co-operation; and that if the English ships could only drive off the galleys which were enfilading his advance, it would be a most valuable service and would enable him to proceed to the victorious storming of the fort.

During this exchange of compliments the captain got very restive, but a warning wink from Nicky calmed him,

and soon he was rewarded by being allowed to discuss the actual details of the morrow's operations.

It was agreed that the *Red Dragon* and the *Hosiander* should cross the bay as soon as they heard the Mogul's guns. The pirate galleys were to be sunk if possible, but at all events driven out of harm's way. The English were then to turn the tables on the pirates ashore by enfilading their breastwork, pouring in a hot fire from the flank until the Mogul's troops could advance near enough for further shots to be dangerous.

The plan went as smoothly as that new clockwork which had so much delighted the Mogul's court at Agra.

As soon as the galleys had settled to their congenial task of cannonading infantry who could not possibly approach them (except by swimming), the two ships weighed anchor and slipped quietly across the bay. The first intimation the pirates received that these Feringhees intended to take a hand was when a broadside crashed into them at close quarters, spreading red ruin across their decks.

They had no chance to hit back effectively. Their ancient light cannon were no match for the modern ordnance fresh from the Sussex foundries. One galley, badly holed, began to sink, and those of its crew who were unwounded leapt overboard, swimming through the breakers to join their comrades behind the breastwork. The other galley, with half her oars smashed, limped to the shelter of the cove, where the surrounding rocks protected her low hull from outside fire.

But the interference of the English was not allowed to pass without a retort. Smoke-puffs issued from invisible embrasures in the cliff-face, and cannon-balls began to

plop unpleasantly close to them. Soon, as the pirates found the range, one of the shots landed on the deck of the *Red Dragon*, sending splinters in every direction.

Best swore and called to the master-gunner. "Can ye answer that?"

"No, sir, I can't get enough elevation."

To lie there while the guns above them lobbed cannon-balls on to their decks was unthinkable. Prudence (and fear of the Governor and shareholders of the East India Company) counselled a retreat to safe distance. Instinct murmured temptingly: "Go ashore and spike the blessed guns!" (Only "blessed" was not the kind of adjective commonly used by Captain Best's instinct.) At any rate, instinct won, as—with Captain Best—it usually did.

"Volunteers for a landing-party?" he bellowed.

There was a chorus of response. He had called for volunteers because there was real danger ashore—scimitars at six feet were very different from antiquated cannon at several hundred yards—and he had no desire to lead any man into risks not fairly provided for in his articles.

But there was no lack of men ready to follow him ashore. Not perhaps from any romantic love of glory or (save in a few cases like his own) from sheer devilry and love of battle. . . . But this was a pirates' lair, wasn't it? Pirates who'd done so well for themselves that the emperor had sent troops from hundreds of miles away to settle them! Clearly, then, there would be loot worth picking up in that fortress on the cliff-top, if only they could get there before the native troops. A seaman's life was hard, rough as an animal's, and miserably paid. Wasn't it worth risking your neck when there was a chance of gold and jewels that might buy comfort and idleness ashore for the rest of your natural life?

With these hopes racing through their heads, they lowered the boats on the seaward side, where they were sheltered from fire, and swarmed down into them. Nicky went with the rest, not from any of the motives already mentioned, but because he would have felt rather ashamed to stay on board when everyone else was eager to land. He followed Best into one of the boats, and John dropped nimbly after him. Timothy was at the tiller.

"Let her go, lads!"

The boat plunged away, swung round and crossed beneath the high stern of the ship, and darted for the cove. There was a howl from the pirates on the galley, and the water instantly was flicked with innumerable bullets. To these were soon added arrows—long, thin, wicked missiles, which would go through a man's arm like a pin through paper, and seemed much more likely to find their mark than the bullets fired from out-of-date arquebuses.

Luckily it was only for a brief minute that the landing-party were exposed to this fire. By that time they had run alongside the galley and leapt aboard, snapping their pistols and hewing right and left with their cutlasses.

The pirates did not wait to fight. They turned, jumped ashore, and raced up the cliff-paths like monkeys.

"After 'em!" Best led the chase, brandishing his sword.

It was well that the sun had not yet reached its full strength. The promontory on which the fort stood rose a clear two hundred feet from the water's edge—and, with death whizzing past their ears, it seemed unwise to pause for breath.

Nicky was close at his captain's elbow. Best was panting like a bellows and his face was turkey-red. Nicky ex-

pected apoplexy at any moment. Certainly, if one of the fleeing pirates were to turn suddenly at bay, the captain would be in a poor condition to defend himself.

And then—one of them did.

He leapt unexpectedly from behind a rock at a bend in the steep path. Nicky caught a glimpse of dark eyes blazing above the rim of a brass-nailed shield, of sandalled feet set in a stance of defence, of a curved scimitar uplifted with white steel blade as blinding as glass in the sun. . . .

He had kept a pistol unfired for such a moment as this. He pulled the trigger.

The bullet clanged on the metal shield. He saw the dark eyes wince. But the scimitar hardly wavered.

The next moment Tommy Best charged up the path like an elephant, brought his sword crashing down, and sent the pirate rolling off the path, down, down in a cloud of red, sandy dust, until he lay in the shallow water at the cliff-foot.

"And I'll trouble you not to let that thing off in my ear again!" was all the thanks Nicky got for his help.

The fort had no scheme of defences. It was a haphazard cluster of thick-walled buildings, with guns mounted at convenient points. The pirates had never expected such a vigorous assault.

Once the Englishmen got a footing on the summit of the cliff the fight was as good as over. One by one the guns were carried at the sword-point. As they were silenced the Mogul's troops advanced across the isthmus with a yell of triumph, crossed the much-battered breast-work, and surged up the slope to complete the victory.

There was a short, brutal struggle on the cliff-top, in which the remaining pirates were shown scant mercy.

Then all was silent except for the chattering voices of the conquerors.

The Mogul's general approached Best with a deep salaam and the offer of a substantial share in the loot.

"I shall acquaint the emperor with the part you have played, Captain Best. You may rest assured that His Majesty will not prove ungrateful!"

CHAPTER XXIV

A MESSAGE FROM THE MOGUL

THE *Red Dragon* and her consort lay for some weeks in the Bay of Moha, repairing the damage sustained during the recent fighting, and enabling the wounded to rest and recover. The Mogul's troops also maintained their camp, merely planting a garrison in the fort. The general was awaiting further orders from his master.

Aboard the English ships brisk preparations were afoot for the celebration of Christmas, by now only a few days distant. The surrounding countryside had been ransacked to provide as much of the traditional fare as possible, and, despite the unseasonable heat of the Indian sun, it looked as though the festivities would be well worthy of the occasion.

On December the twenty-second the Portuguese fleet hove in sight once more—a fleet considerably reinforced since the last encounter.

"Now why couldn't they have gone on leaving us alone?" lamented the bo'sun.

Best heard him as he passed along the deck. "Don't worry, bo'sun! We'll settle 'em once for all and still have time to eat our Christmas dinner. It'll give us an appetite."

"Ay, sir—but what if the Dons cook our goose for us?"

The captain's laugh rumbled away. . . .

On the next day the *Red Dragon* and the *Hosiander* sailed to meet the approaching fleet. The Indian troops crowded the cliff-top and the beach to watch the battle.

Nicky was reminded of the old tale he had read at school, of how Xerxes and his host had watched the sea-fight at Salamis.

There was something symbolical about the situation. Portugal and England were battling for mastery, and India was looking on—India, imagining herself judge of the conflict, when more truly she was the prize for the victor.

Throughout the morning the cliffs and hills echoed the boom of gun-fire. Backwards and forwards ran the English vessels, hurling their salvos of iron into the hulls and rigging of their adversaries. Once again superior seamanship and gunnery prevailed over mere numbers. At midday the enemy turned tail and ran for the open sea.

Best was determined to settle the business for good and all. He chased the fugitives along the coast for four hours, raking them with a merciless fire, breaking up their formation and scattering them to every point of the compass. It would be a long time before the Portuguese Admiral tried again.

At sundown the English returned to their anchorage with a loss of three men killed. They were buried at dawn, and the shots which crashed out over their graves were the last that Moha Bay was to hear for some time to come.

It was Christmas Eve. The crews turned light-heartedly to their festivities.

And early in the New Year came a message from the Mogul . . .

So, in January, 1613, a factory of the English East India Company was established in Surat by imperial decree.

Nicky stood on the quarter-deck a few days later, watching the long file of coolies carrying pepper-bags up

the gang-plank and passing them into the cavernous hold of the *Red Dragon*. But he saw much more than that.

He saw the long leagues of ocean between here and home, flecked with the white sails of merchantmen—English, Dutch, Scotch, French, yes, even Spanish and Portuguese . . . Hadn't they fought to break monopoly, to drive the dog from the manger, to open the Indian trade to everyone?

Later he was to see that dream shattered. To see his Company fighting for a monopoly as rigid as the Portuguese, to see it snarling in defence of its huge profits not only against foreign rivals but other Englishmen. But today no such vision troubled him.

The ships faded from his mind's eye, along with the grey wastes of water. Instead he saw London's gables and steeples along the skyline, crowded and huddled along the bank of the Thames. In a few months he would see them in reality. India would be a memory. He would be home . . .

The playhouses would be opening for the summer. He could almost smell the oranges, the reek of tobacco . . . Perhaps, after all, he would take to the theatre, write a play himself, full of Eastern wonders . . . or maybe he would feel the call to go voyaging again. Time would show.

Under his breath he hummed:

"Fortune, my foe, where art thou calling me . . .?"

And only the gulls answered, screaming overhead, and their answer no man could interpret.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

SOME readers may like to know how much of this book is fact, and how much fiction. Well, William Hawkins did sail from England in the *Hector* on April 1st, 1607. (It is just possible that an early version of *The Tempest* was produced before that date, but this is probably one of the small points on which I have taken liberties with history.) But he certainly left his ship at Surat, went up to Agra, became a royal favourite, married an Armenian at the Mogul's wish, was plotted against and almost poisoned by the Portuguese, and "returned with some difficulty to Surat," where he joined with Sir Henry Middleton. Similarly, Captain Best did fight his battles (including the siege of the pirates at Moha Bay) roughly in the way they are described here. Jehan Gir, Itmad ud Daulah, and Mocrob Khan were all real people. But in every case except the Mogul's, I have had to guess at the appearance of the men, and deduce their character from what we know of their actions.

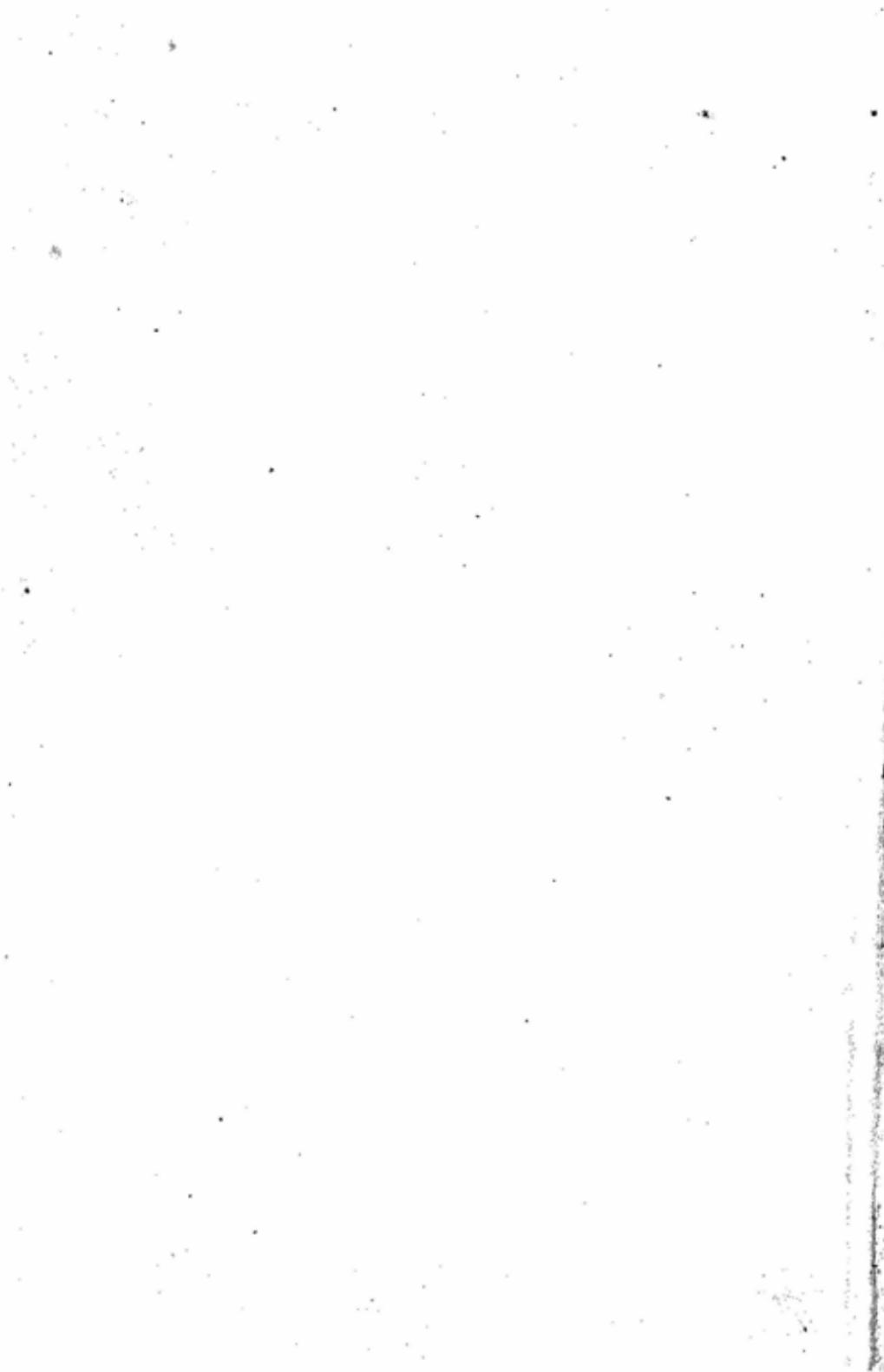
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